

**GOLD RUSTLERS OF
WYOMING**

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Westbound along the Oregon Trail, Gideon Castle's gold-laden wagon train survived the savage onslaught of marauding Indians, thanks to the timely intervention of Monte Webb and his armed companions. But the caravan left behind it a blood-marked back trail for every renegade in the Wyoming country to follow.

Webb accepted the job of trail guide. Disaster piled on disaster as men were killed for the sake of the gold. Castle's daughter was kidnapped, and her jealous fiancé thwarted Webb at every turn. However, Webb had promised to conduct the party safely, and he was a man to back up his word, even though it had to be with bullets.

GOLD RUSTLERS OF WYOMING

By

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"Dead Gulch Hold Up"
etc.



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CHAPTER I

Army Scout

A bedlam of Indian war whoops and crashing gunfire came out of the rain-lashed night to guide the Fort Laramie detachment across the muddy Platte and up the south bank.

Lightning flashes gave the cavalrymen a glimpse of Monte Webb and Sam Benton, as the two buckskin-clad army scouts headed off up the looming slope of a ridge. Doggedly the Laramie troops spurred after them, as the noise of battle was engulfed in rolls of ear-numbing thunder.

They reached the backbone of the hill only to be halted by the sheer horror of the scene which the next lightning burst revealed on the sagebrush flats below them.

Hundreds of Sioux warriors were galloping like a maelstrom of doom around a hub composed of covered wagons drawn tongue-to-tailgate in a huge circle. Sporadic puffs of gun smoke spouted from under Conestoga wagons, as the sorely beleaguered defenders returned the salvos of lead from the shrieking enemy.

Scattered fires guttered fitfully at various points around the circle of wagons where Indian arrows, rolled in bear grease and gunpowder, had set the canvas hoods ablaze.

Webb hauled his Spencer rifle from saddle boot, dismay gripping him as he sized up the fearful odds which the Oregon Trail caravan was facing.

He judged the wagons to total nearly a hundred. But the besieged emigrants were bucking an Ogalala war party which the young plainsman estimated to number at least three hundred scalp-hunting warriors.

"The Sioux are closing in for the kill, men!" Webb shouted. "Our only chance is to break it up before the sun rises—or they'll lift every white's scalp in that caravan—"

The twenty cavalrymen did not need any actual order to charge. Already, they were raking their mounts with spurs, fanning out into a thin line of steel and horseflesh as they hurtled down the brushy hillside into the teeth of the melee.

Sioux braves, plastered on the outside ribs of their fleet Hunkpapa ponies to shield themselves as they poured a ruthless hail of arrows and bullets into the westward-bound wagons, got their first inkling of counter-attack when a dozen of their number were dumped from horseback by bullets from a new direction.

Yells came from the circle of wagons, as the pioneers caught sight of blue-clad troops hammering down out of the night from the direction of the Platte, flinging themselves into the battle with reckless disregard for the disastrous odds.

Victory whoops turned into screeches of dismay, as the Laramie troops smashed through to break up the wheeling red-skinned raiders, shooting a swath of doom as they rode.

Then feather-bonneted chieftains began reining off into the darkness of the outer plain.

Renewed gunfire came from the crippled ranks of the defending wagoneers, as ebbing courage mounted anew at the unexpected arrival of reinforcements from the Wyoming military outpost.

Pressing their advantage, aiming and firing at full gallop, Monte Webb's troops gave the scattering red men no chance to reform their ranks. Schooled to prairie warfare, the Laramie riders knew their only hope was to keep their adversaries on the move.

Yipping like coyotes, the copper-skinned braves fled into the night, never discovering the scanty number of uniformed troops that had swooped down in counter-attack without warning.

One by one the sounds of combat died away, as the hoof-beats of the retreating Indians subsided beyond the veil of drizzling rain. The crackle of burning wagon hoods and the moans of dying and wounded men formed a ghastly accompaniment to the distance-muted thunderclaps of the storm which was blowing itself out far to the southward.

And then, as Monte Webb quit the futile chase and headed back towards the wagons, the rising sun pierced the scudding black clouds banked on the eastern horizon and flooded the prairie battle-ground with an almost unearthly scarlet glare.

Even to a plainsman of Webb's experience, the scene was a blood-chilling one. Arrow-riddled carcasses of oxen and mules strewed the prairie outside the ring of wagons. Dead

men lay slumped in the wet grass beneath many of the prairie schooners.

His ears registered the sobbings of bereaved mothers and wives, the pitiful cries of injured children, the profanity of men who were beginning to emerge into the open to survey the carnage about them in the cruel, revealing light of day.

Swinging out of saddle, Webb thrust his Spencer into its scabbard and ground-tied his pony a short distance from the wagons. To westward, the army scout saw Sam Benton and the other Laramie riders coming back from their brief chase.

Of the red men, Webb saw no trace on the horizon. By now, he reflected, the scattered Sioux would be well beyond the Platte. And just as well. Only the element of total surprise, coupled with shielding darkness and the storm, had prevented the Indians from learning how pitifully few had been the troops that had routed them.

A hoarse yell arrested Webb's attention, and he turned to see a hoary-bearded oldster climbing over the tongue of a charred and smouldering mud wagon a few yards away.

The emigrant's face was blood-smeared, and dull horror glazed his eyes as he stumbled out to greet Webb, a long-barrelled Sharp's rifle cradled under one bandaged arm.

"Thank God—for a miracle!" the oldster cried. "We didn't have a chance to send a man to Fort Laramie to get help. Seemed like an eternity, but we'd only been fightin' half an hour when you showed up. We was about at the drag end of our rope—"

Monte Webb nodded grimly as he shook hands.

"You can thank my pard, Sam Benton, for our arriving in time," said the scout. "Sam knew an Ogalala war party was watching this section of the Oregon Trail, and when he spotted the dust of your wagons yesterday afternoon he rode over to the fort and told us. The commandant decided you might need a military escort. I'm Monte Webb, chief scout for the Laramie garrison."

Tears glistened in the old wagoner's eyes as he clung to the scout's hand.

"I'm Gideon Castle, the captain o' this caravan," he said huskily. "We're mostly Missouri folks, headin' for Oregon. Them red devils took us plumb by surprise. Don't know yet how many men we lost—"

He broke off, as the returning Fort Laramie cavalrymen drew rein about them. Their leader, a slim-built man of medium height who wore fringed buckskins instead of an army uniform, swung out of saddle to confront Monte Webb. Gideon Castle stared fixedly at the soldiers, unaware that he was standing beside Sam Benton, a famous plainsman, whose name was already a legend throughout the Western frontier.

"Webb, these emigrants have only themselves to blame for mighty near bein' wiped out," Benton said disgustedly. "Did you ever see a camp site that was any more of a murder trap than this one? This hill to the north, cuttin' out all view o' the Platte River. And a gulch beyond, where them Sioux raiders were able to ride up within easy arrow range of the wagons, without a guard bein' able to spot 'em and give the alarm. Who in tarnation was responsible for campin' in such an exposed place, here in the thick o' Injun country?"

Gideon Castle jabbed a thumb at his chest.

"I'm boss o' this caravan," he said. "But our campin' places are selected by the Oregon Trail guide we hired back in Independence. Feller——"

Castle broke off abruptly as a shout came from the wagons behind them. Turning, the men saw a tall figure clad in the brass-buttoned blue tunic of a Union army captain, heading toward them at a run. The presence of a Civil War officer in a westbound wagon train brought a grunt of surprise from Monte Webb.

"Gid!" cried the army man hoarsely, coming to a halt before the wagon captain. "June—the Sioux carried her off! I—I been making the rounds looking for her, thought she might be nursing the wounded, but Zeke Prichett saw two braves carry her off at the very start of the fight——"

Gideon Castle's time-seamed face turned chalky under the blood stains that streaked it.

"June—carried off——" Horror choked off his voice and he stared at the man who had brought him the message.

Monte Webb reached out to grip the army man's sleeve, his face taut with alarm.

"What's this?" demanded the scout. "You say the Sioux carried off one of your women-folk? Who was she? How old was she?"

The officer swallowed hard, his eyes bleak.

"June Castle, Gid's daughter. She hadn't turned twenty yet. She and I—were to be married—when we reached Oregon. But now—" He covered his face with both hands. He regained his composure with an effort and turned to face Monte Webb.

"I—my name's Ross Flagg," he whispered huskily. "Isn't there anything that can be done? Is there any chance to . . . to buy June's safety—barter with the Indians with guns or blankets or something?"

Monte Webb shook his head grimly.

"You don't know these Sioux, Flagg. They'd never voluntarily release a prisoner. The only way to get her back would be to take her away from them. I know. I've had years of experience with these Ogalalas. Are you dead certain she was carried off?"

Flagg's mouth twitched with suppressed emotion.

"There isn't a shadow of a doubt of it," he said. "Zeke Pinchett, one of our drivers, saw June go out and try to help bring in one of our look-outs who was hit by an arrow at the start of the fight. He saw two warriors grab her and take her off, dragging her by the hair. Pinchett got a bullet in the leg, attempting to rescue her. He's lucky they didn't lift his scalp before he crawled back to his wagon."

Monte Webb squared his shoulders in a sudden gesture of resolution. Elbowing his way out of the growing crowd of white-faced emigrants, the scout mounted his waiting horse.

"I've got a pretty good idea where the Sioux took your daughter, Castle," he called to the caravan leader. "I'll do what I can to get her back safely. You see," his voice deepened with emotion, "I know how you and Flagg feel. I lost my own mother and sister to the Indians. I reckon I'd ride through hell and back to keep a white woman from bein' made a slave in an Indian camp."

As Webb wheeled his mount in the direction of the Platte, Sam Benton broke the silence with a shout of dismay:

"Webb, you dang fool—come back here! You can't buck that Sioux camp single-handed! You wouldn't have the chance of a snowball in hell —"

Benton's voice died away as Webb shouted back over his shoulder:

"You boys'll have your hands full helping out these

Missouri people, Sam. If June Castle's still alive, I aim to get to her. And it'll have to be a lone-wolf job, so don't send anybody after me, understand?"

Benton stared in open-jawed amazement as his fellow scout spurred into a gallop, heading up the northern slope.

"There goes the best doggoned plainsman west o' the Mississippi, gents," he told the staring wagoneers. "If there's a white man alive who can save your daughter for you, Castle, I reckon Webb's that man."

Fresh hope leaped into the faces of Ross Flagg and Gideon Castle, as they saw Monte Webb vanish over the skyline.

Then Castle hurried back toward the wagons to inform his grief-stricken wife that there yet remained a spark of hope that they might see their missing daughter alive again.

But none knew better than Sam Benton the suicidal odds which would face Monte Webb—that the hope of seeing June Castle restored to her parents now rested on the daring of a lone man who was pitting his own resourcefulness against the ferocity of the most savage tribe of Sioux along the Oregon Trail.

Monte Webb made no effort to locate the trail of the Sioux war party which he and the platoon of cavalrymen from Fort Laramie had driven off from the wagon camp at dawn.

The heavy downpour which had accompanied the passage of the thunderstorm across the plains had effectively wiped out any trace of the fleeing Indians.

But Webb, who owed his job as scout for the military garrison to his expert knowledge of the Sioux tribes and the terrain of south-western Wyoming, had a fair idea where the Indians had headed, after being thwarted in their massacre plans.

Lean, whip-muscled, Webb rode erect in the saddle with the lithe ease of a man whose very bones had been warped by years of riding. He had been born in a pioneer's sod shack out in the Idaho country, and at fourteen had joined his father in a trek to the Mother Lode in California, witnessing the feverish heyday of the gold rush.

In Hornitas and Poker Flat and Angels Camp, Monte Webb had panned his share of gold. What was more important, his life in the rough mining camps had hardened his muscles, broadened his chest; and he had learned to master the

· 44 Dragoon Colt six-gun which now rode in a buffalo-hide holster along his right thigh.

The intervening years had been turbulent ones for Webb. The outbreak of war between the Union and the Confederacy brought him and his father eastward once more, Monte to an important scouting duty at Fort Laramie, his father to a hero's grave in the blood-soaked soil of Gettysburg.

Now, at thirty, Monte Webb belonged to the West that had sired him. As a buffalo hunter from the Bighorn to the Dakotas, he had gained a first-hand knowledge of the Indian's view-point and shared, to a certain extent, the bitterness of the red tribes against the encroaching wave of the pale-faced empire builders.

His twenties had seen Monte Webb gain a friendship with many tribal chieftains, and a working knowledge of the Cheyenne, Sioux, Kiowa, Pa-Ute and Blackfoot tongues.

Only a week before, when a fur trapper arrived in the stockade at Fort Laramie with news that Gideon Castle's train of some ninety-odd covered wagons from Missouri was following the Mormon Trail north-westward from Julesburg, it had been Monte Webb who had gone to the commandant with the advice that had rescued Castle's caravan from a grisly, bloody end.

"Red Cloud's Ogalalas are ridin' the warpath between here an' Chimney Rock, major," Webb had reported. "A slow-movin' trail like this Missouri outfit will be prime bait for Red Cloud's warriors. I figger we ought to escort those Missourians as far as Laramie. An' my friend Sam Benton, here, agrees with me."

Webb's mouth clamped in a grim line as he sent his sorrel at a tireless canter across the rolling country toward the North Platte. He had more than a humanitarian interest in thwarting the ghastly fate which Chief Red Cloud's braves would mete out to the daughter of Gideon Castle, assuming that they had kidnapped her during the attack. Burned deep in Webb's memory was the death of his own mother and sister, when he and his old father had returned to their cabin in Idaho to find it a shambles following a 'Rapaho raid.

High noon found Webb reining to a halt atop Coyote Peak, a lofty elevation which gave, on a fair day, a view clear to Fort Laramie.

Uncasing a battered brass telescope from the case at his pommel, Webb scanned the open country behind him. The rain would prevent any dust clouds from rising from the Oregon Trail, but a short search with the powerful glass showed the scout what he was looking for.

Gideon Castle's train of covered wagons was crawling up the distant trail, wagons grouped in military-like units of fifteen wagons each. Even through the telescope, the westward advance of the wagons was so slow as to seem almost stationary. Two miles an hour was a good gait for prairie schooners drawn by plodding ox teams.

Webb swung the telescope back to northward, following the dwarf cottonwoods and willow growth which marked the twisting course of the North Platte.

The junction of Buffalo Creek with the larger river was hidden by rolling hills, less than five miles away. But the telescope picked out the thin, bluish haze of smoke rising from the tepees of the big Ogalala camp which Webb had scouted only the week before.

In the act of casing the glasses, Monte Webb reeled violently in saddle as a flint-headed arrow zipped out of nowhere to knock the flat-crowned beaver plains hat from his head.

Even as his sorrel reared with a snort of panic, Monte Webb somersaulted backward over the cantle, to land heavily on the rain-packed earth. He rolled suddenly as might a dead man—to wind up on his stomach, his head in the shadow of a clump of buffalo grass.

Seconds later, he saw a mounted Indian ride out from behind a boulder nest fifty yards to the north-east, on the highest point of Coyote Peak. Webb recognized him as Lame Horse, a petty Ogalala chieftain.

With a shrill whoop of victory, the paint-daubed warrior galloped up alongside Webb's empty-saddled mount.

Through slitted cyclids, the prone army scout saw Lame Horse dismount, the wind fluttering his grimy blanket and the war bonnet of eagle feathers with its plumed tail bannering in the breeze. Behind the warrior's shoulder was a deer-hide quiver, loaded with feather-tipped arrows. He clutched an old army rifle in one hand, a yew-wood bow in the other.

Striding forward, the Ogalala discarded his bulkier weapons

to draw an American-made bowie knife from a belt sheath under his blanket.

Glittering black eyes flashed with excitement as they ranged along the fallen scout's body and came to rest on his shock of brown hair.

Then, even as the Indian advanced with scalping knife poised for the grisly task of adding another trophy to the scalplocks dangling from his belt, the right arm of the "corpse" blurred to the walnut stock of his holstered Dragoon .44.

"*Waagh!*!" The Indian took a backward step as Webb reared to his knees, the muzzle of his six-gun whipping up to cover the warrior's midriff.

"Hold it, Lame Horse!" warned the scout, speaking in the guttural Ogalala jargon. "Drop knife, or white man's thunderbolt blow you to pieces for wolf carrion!"

The scalping knife slid from Lame Horse's fingers, but in an instant the Indian had regained his composure.

Instinct made Webb swivel his gaze toward the pile of glacier-deposited boulders in which the Sioux had been hiding. He was just in time to see another brave, sunlight gleaming on a naked coppery chest, leap out of hiding with a musket thundering in his grasp.

The heavy laden ball bored through space inches from Webb's face, as he swung his Dragoon in a short arc and let hammer fall.

Through spouting gun smoke, Webb saw the Indian rifleman sprawl backward in the granite rocks, skull shattered by the .44 slug. And through the tail of his eye the scout caught the flash of sun rays on an iron tomahawk blade, as Lame Horse charged forward with war hatchet upraised for a chopping blow at the white man's skull.

At point-blank range, Webb pulled trigger again.

With a choked gasp, Lame Horse halted, blood gushing from a wound low on his breastbone. Then the Indian's knees buckled, and he dropped, kicking in the mud at Webb's feet.

Alert for further attack. Webb sprang to seize the bit ring of his sorrel's bridle, putting the horse between him and the rock nest. Warily, leading the horse, Webb circled the boulders to make sure that a third Sioux was not waiting in ambush.

It was easy enough to guess why Lame Horse and his single companion had been waiting atop Coyote Peak. Undoubtedly Chief Red Cloud had dispatched his two ace scouts to spy on the advance of Gideon Castle's wagon train to the southward, with a view to making another raid on the emigrants if their cavalry guard was found to be a small one.

Returning to the corpse of Lame Horse, Webb paused in the act of mounting, eyes ranging along the dead Indian's war bonnet and blanket.

Then, stooping, the scout removed the two items of Sioux garb from Lame Horse's inert form. A boyish grin flickered over his mouth as he fitted the eagle-feathered war bonnet on his own head, and pulled Lame Horse's vile-smelling blanket over his own shoulders.

"Much obliged, Lame Horse," chuckled Webb, addressing the dead warrior in whose lodge, years before, he had once swapped tobacco for beaver pelts. "Your duds may come in handy tonight when I get to your chief's camp."

CHAPTER 2

Red Cloud's Captive

The sun was westering into fleecy, blood-red cloud banks on the Wyoming horizon when Monte Webb worked his way to the crest of the scantily timbered ridge overlooking the fork of the North Platte and Buffalo Creek.

It had taken all afternoon to cover the five miles from the look-out pinnacle of Coyote Peak, for Webb knew the peril in approaching the war camp of the Ogalala tribe.

Therefore, he had followed the twisting courses of creek beds across the prairie flats, blotting his trail as much as possible in the puddles formed by the night's rainstorm.

He had seen no other Indian sign during the afternoon, although he expected, at each turn of the gulch banks, to encounter Sioux scouts sent out to relieve Lame Horse and his partner on the look-out peak.

Dismounting in a bosque of dwarf pine, Webb tied his mount. Then, removing his seven-shot Spencer carbine from the saddle boot, he stalked his way through underbrush and scattered timber until he reached a vantage point overlooking the forks of the rivers.

Stretched out below him was an impressive sight—a large Sioux encampment, representing the headquarters of the most brutal chieftain in the plains country—Red Cloud, chief of the Ogalalas.

Yellowish-coloured wigwams, most of them with smoke purling from the nested poles at the apex of each cone, were pitched along the east bank of the Buffalo. Their number indicated to the scout that Red Cloud was camped here with upward of a thousand warriors.

Fat squaws were smoking fish and venison and buffalo meat at crude racks along the gravelly bank of Buffalo Creek, many of them with chubby-faced papooses strapped to their backs. On the opposite bank of the creek, a sizeable herd of fleet Hunkpapa ponies were grazing in lush bluestem, guarded by Ogalala braves in their teens.

To Webb's ears came the muted throb of war drums, and the soul-curdling chant of warriors returned from the hunt. But this was no victory song; rather it was a pæan of vengeance, a mourning for the losses they had sustained in their bloody foray against the Oregon Trail camp the night before.

Blue twilight followed close on the sinking of the sun, and the smoke from scores of supper fires began to mushroom low over the tepees to form a milky blue strata like a canopy.

Clad in war bonnet and blanket, Monte Webb resembled an Ogalala, even at close range. His hands, face and throat were dyed ruddy bronze, from years of enduring savage gales and relentless suns. And on that disguise, Webb staked his chances of being able to reach June Castle.

As yet he had seen no clue to indicate that the white girl was a captive in the Sioux village; but his long association with plains tribal customs made him positive that the daughter of the Missouri wagon captain was being held prisoner here.

Tension pulled at Webb's nerves as the dusk thickened and the beat of the war drums increased in volume.

In the central part of the village was a buffalo-hide lodge, larger than any of the individual tepees. That, Webb knew, was the lodge of the tribal shaman, or witch doctor.

A second lodge, only slightly smaller than the shaman's dwelling, belonged to Red Cloud himself. Shields and lances were stacked outside, with human scalp locks adding a grisly touch to the decorations.

Not until darkness had fallen did Monte Webb emerge from the underbrush. He dared not lead his horse out of the timber, for he knew that the Ogalala camp would be patrolled by vigilant, owl-eyed sentries.

Making his way down the slope toward the nearest of the wigwams, Webb detoured in the direction of the Platte, where the hillside was covered with a dense carpet of dead thistle and buckbrush which had been killed months before when a prairie fire had ravaged the terrain to the very brink of the Platte.

Webb had made his plans well, during the hour he squatted in hiding above the Indian camp. He was staking everything on the effect of the day's sunlight on the dead weeds and brush that furred the hillside. If the brush had dried out—

Wriggling his way to the outskirts of the weed patch,

Webb rummaged in a pocket of his buckskin jacket and removed a small brass canister in which he kept a half-dozen sulphur matches for emergency use.

These he repocketed, in favour of an oil-soaked wick and flint and steel which were a part of his frontier equipment. A match might cause too brilliant a flare, which if seen by some vigilant guard would betray Webb's position too soon.

Locating a tinder-dry bed of thistles, Webb set to work with flint and steel, masking the operation under the folds of his Indian blanket. When he had the wick ablaze, the scout applied the naked flame to the thistle bed.

~ A moment later, greedy red tongues of flame were licking through the weeds, and the scout was scuttling back into the denser underbrush.

An evening breeze, whipping down the bed of Buffalo Creek, fanned the blazing thistles and carried a shower of ruddy sparks into the pithy buckbrush beyond.

Loosening his Dragoon .44 in its holster, Webb squatted down to await the results. They were not long in coming.

Somewhere down among the wigwams, a squaw's startled shriek rang out over the Indian village. It was picked up immediately by a yapping of dogs, and then a hoarse bellow from an Ogalala buck.

Flames leaped skyward as the breeze fanned Webb's small fire into a solid wall of scarlet.

Inside of ten minutes, Webb knew that the advancing brush fire would threaten the tepees, and the flying sparks would serve to stampede the herd of ponies across the narrow stream.

Hoarse yells made a bedlam in the camp, as the roused Sioux trooped out of wigwams, racing toward the creek with blankets which they doused in the water. Then the Indians sprinted through the village toward the brush fire, intent on beating it out before it caused serious damage. The bucks were joined by the younger squaws, and every child capable of wielding a water-soaked blanket or sack.

"Reckon now's the time!" Muttering the words through clenched teeth, Monte Webb got to his feet and headed down the slope, his fluttering war bonnet a grey streak in the gloom.

A moment later he was down on the flats, threading his way through the Sioux tepees.

Running squaws jostled him, carrying dripping baskets of water on their shoulders. In the night, no one paid the army scout a second glance, assuming that the blanket-shrouded figure was one of their own tribe.

Unerringly Webb made his way to the cleared-off space in the centre of the village where war dances and other ceremonies were staged. Directly ahead of him was the shaman's lodge, a flickering fire visible through its open flap.

Utter confusion raged through the village, as the sky took on a reddish cast from the flames which were now roaring unchecked through the hillside brush. And on that confusion, Webb was gambling his life, in a mad effort to invade the heart of the Indian village and achieve his purpose single-handed.

Sprinting across the open arena between Red Cloud's tent and that of the medicine man, Webb skidded to a halt as he narrowly missed colliding with a towering Indian emerging from the shaman's lodge. The Sioux's head was covered with a hideous witch mask, and his chest was hung with cow horns, human scalps and bear-claw necklaces.

"Lame Horse!" yelled the shaman, Swift Otter, brandishing an eagle-bone whistle in Webb's face. "Why do you not fight the—" The head medicine man of the Ogalala tribe did not finish his outburst.

An instant later Webb's rock-hard fist shot out from under his blanket to land like a sledge-hammer on the shaman's jaw. Stunned by the blow in spite of the protecting mask, Swift Otter collapsed against a supporting timber of his lodge.

Before the medicine man could recover his senses, Monte Webb had unholstered his six-gun and brought the barrel down in a whistling arc which smashed through Swift Otter's devil mask and laid open his scalp to expose white bone. Knocked cold, the medicine man sprawled on his back.

Webb whirled about, wondering if his attack on the holy man had been witnessed by any passing Indians. But the entire population of the village now seemed to be out fighting the brush fire.

Ducking low through the hide flaps of the lodge doorway, the disguised scout halted inside Swift Otter's holy of holies.

"June! June Castle!" he called in a low, urgent voice.

Across the fire which crackled in the centre of the lodge, Monte Webb's eyes focused on the figure of a lone white girl, lashed with rawhide thongs to a heavy post which supported the lodge roof.

Stark terror was in the captive's face as Monte Webb headed towards her, a bowie knife glittering through the smoke-filled room.

The muscles of June Castle's throat were constricted by the accumulated horrors of the long day. And now, as she saw a feather-bonneted figure striding purposefully toward her with knife steel glittering in his fist, the girl was positive that the doom she had dreaded momentarily since her capture was now at hand.

"Don't scream, June! I'm no Injun!"

The six words, voiced in hoarse English, made the girl stiffen with incredulity even as Monte Webb leaped to her side. Staring, she watched the knife of her strange benefactor slip through the thongs which lashed her knees and ankles to the lodge post.

A moment later she was staggering forward into the protecting curve of Webb's arm, as he severed the bonds holding her body against the post and her arms pinioned to her sides.

"I'm a scout from Fort Laramie, June!" whispered Webb, sheathing his bowie knife and holding her at arm's length, strong fingers wrapped about her forearms. "Are you able to walk?"

Fighting back the hysteria which mounted in her throat, June Castle could not find the strength to answer. She nodded, wisps of chestnut hair dropping about her face.

"All right, then. We've got a few minutes to spare, while these Injuns are busy with that fire. Meanwhile, you got to be fixed up like a squaw."

Darting across the lodge, Webb snatched up a buffalo robe from among the many hides which carpeted the shaman's lodge.

When he returned, it was to see June Castle collecting herself with a visible effort that brought a gleam of admiration to the scout's eyes.

"You came—from the wagon camp?" she asked.

Webb nodded, whipping the buffalo robe about the girl's shoulders and then encircling her waist with his left arm.

"Yes. Your father's all right. The Laramie troops drove off the Injuns before they caused much damage."

The news seemed to revive the girl like a shot of some potent drug in her veins. Her feet no longer dragged, and the pulse that hammered along the smooth white column of her neck, where the collar of her buckskin jacket had been torn by brutal hands, slowed down perceptibly.

Webb drew his six-gun as he hurried the trembling girl to the door of the shaman's lodge.

Outside, the cone-shaped Indian tents were illuminated with the eerie pink light of the brush fire. Their eardrums were numbed by the shouts of the dismayed Sioux, as a shift of wind brought the full onslaught of the fire directly toward the threatened village.

"I got a horse up on the ridge," Webb told the girl. "Starface'll carry the two of us back to the wagon camp—providin' we get out of this village alive."

A moment later the man and girl were running at top speed across the open space, and ducking down a lane bordered by wigwams.

As they passed one of the lodges a lean mongrel leaped out, fangs exposed in slavering challenge as if the dog scented the presence of an impostor.

Too late, Webb lashed out a boot as the dog sprang. Fangs tangled with the fabric of Lame Horse's blanket, and an instant later the white scout's disguise had been stripped from his back, revealing his buckskin costume. A swipe of his gun caught the dog on its second lunge, dropping it to the ground.

"Come on, we got to leg it!" Webb cried.

June matched the scout's stride as he sprinted toward the edge of the village. Then the girl stifled a scream of terror as they found their way blocked by a breech-clouted Indian warrior returning from the river with a dripping blanket.

The Sioux's hand dropped to a belted tomahawk as the firelight revealed the presence of a paleface in the very heart of the Sioux camp. But the warrior had no opportunity to get the lethal hatchet into action.

Charging the brave with all his force, Webb carried the Indian off his feet. A split clock tick later, the warrior's yell of warning was cut off as Webb's clubbing Dragoon .44 hammered against a bristling scalp lock.



Webb got to his feet, seized June's hand and headed toward the base of the hill. The village was beginning to fill with Indians returning from the fire now, as Red Cloud directed his tribesmen to dismantle what tepees lay within the immediate path of the advancing prairie fire.

Exposed to the crimson glare of the flames which made night into day Monte Webb knew he and June would be doomed if their presence were spotted by Indian eyes.

Another fifty yards, and they were scrambling up the brushy hillside. Cinders and blazing debris beat against them, and rolling clouds of smoke served to screen their desperate flight even as it attacked their lungs and nostrils.

Suddenly June's robe caught on a protruding root, ripping it from her body. Webb yanked her on, as she paused to retrieve it.

"Don't need that now—got to reach the horse——"

Hearts pounding, lungs heaving with strain, the two gained the crest of the hill where the air was purer, cooler.

For a moment they stood there, overlooking the holocaust, watching fascinated as Indians worked frantically to pull down wigwams and get papooses and belongings out of the way of the advancing fire.

"Got to keep goin'," Webb declared. "Red Cloud'll discover all too soon that you're missin'. There'll be the devil to pay if those Sioux cut our tracks in the moonlight."

Webb's sorrel whickered a greeting from the timber ahead. The scout helped June into the saddle, then mounted behind her.

Not until they had put ten miles between them and the Sioux village did Webb rein up to let the double-laden horse regain its wind.

A smile parted June's lips as she turned to face her rescuer, her soft hair blowing against his soot-smeared face.

"I—I haven't thanked you for risking your life tonight to save mine," she said gravely. "I don't even know your name——"

Their danger past, Monte Webb found himself embarrassed under her grateful scrutiny. He found himself thinking, quite irrelevantly, that the daughter of Gideon Castle was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

CHAPTER 3

Midnight Conspiracy

The customary frivolity, laughter and gay music which usually marked the hours before bedtime in Gideon Castle's trail camps was lacking tonight.

They had camped some ten miles beyond the scene of the Indian raid. The presence of Sam Benton and Major Scott's sabre-hung troops from Fort Laramie relieved them of any anxiety over another attack; but over the assembled emigrants tragedy hung like a pall.

Even the children sensed it, crying themselves to sleep in their bedrolls. Grief was visible in the faces of wives and mothers, on the bearded countenances of wagoneers.

They had cause for sorrow. Death had visited seven out of the ninety-two families in the caravan, during the surprise raid that had come just before dawn.

The bereaved families kept apart in the privacy of their wagons and tents, their thoughts on the eleven unmarked graves back on the Trail, which they had purposely blotted out with hoofprints and camp-fire ashes, to prevent the extent of the casualties being known to the Sioux.

But in general, there was cause for thanksgiving in the miracle of the arrival of the Fort Laramie fighters.

Even the men and women whom fate had spared the blight of Indian massacre were depressed tonight, however. The absence of June Castle was making itself felt in a hundred ways. June was easily the most popular of the young women in the Oregon-bound train. She was idolized by the youngsters and admired from a distance by shy swains who envied Captain Ross Flagg, known to be the girl's betrothed.

With supper long since over and a dozen trail-weary men already posted in a wide ring about the circle of wagons, the fate of the daughter of Gideon and Virginia Castle was a thing that destroyed appetites, forbade sleep.

Among the Fort Laramie troops, comments were whispered openly, out of hearing of their commander, Major Scott.

"Sam Benton shouldn't 'a' let Webb go on that trip. The

Injuns'll collect the hair o' the best dang scout this side o' the Mississippi."

"The gal was prob'ly killed soon after they kidnapped her."

"We should 'a' headed Webb off an' forced him to come back while we had the chance!"

And then, out of the night, came a sharp bugle blast, snapping men and women to attention, making a hubbub of excitement sweep through the camp. A sentry had spotted some sign of danger!

"Hoss a-comin'!" he yelled. "Stand by for Injuns!"

The sentry's yell sent women scampering for the shelter of wagons, brought fire-arms to the hands of whiskered men and wide-eyed striplings.

Then, above the pandemonium, the strident voice of Sam Benton quieted the panicky wagoneers.

"At ease, everybody! Sioux don't fight thisaway. If a lone rider is comin' to camp, we got nothin' to fear. Quiet down, folks!"

A rataplan of hoof-beats echoed from out of the north, and then into the circle of fire-light galloped a lone horse, mounted by two riders.

"Lord be praised, it's our June back with us safe!"

"*Monte Webb made it! Doggoned if Monte Webb didn't make it!*"

Unleashed emotions made a din of the west-bound emigrant party then as a concerted rush was made toward the campfire where Monte Webb, his face etched with lines of fatigue, was swinging out of saddle into the eager arms of the cheering Fort Laramie soldiers.

Gideon Castle, his leathery checks tear-stained, hovered before his wife and daughter as they clung to each other.

"Food—rustle up grub, you women!" one of the less excited men remembered to call.

It was an hour before Monte Webb managed to get away from the tumultuous demonstration staged in his honour by the grateful, hero-worshipping Missourians. Never in the annals of the Oregon Trail had a rider emerged from the jaws of death to receive such noisy and heart-felt plaudits, but to the lean young army scout the uproar was a source of keen embarrassment, an ordeal from which his reserved nature shrank instinctively.

On the excuse of seeing after the welfare of his pony, Monte Webb retired to a far rim of the circle of prairie schooners. Even there, he was sought out by Captain Ross Flagg, who had followed Sam Benton to the spot where Webb had fled to escape the adulation of the emigrants.

"Webb, I guess you know what it means to me—having my future wife restored to me," Flagg said, gripping the scout's hand in the darkness. "I had given up June for lost. It—it's like having her resurrected from the grave—"

Webb smiled wearily.

"You got yourself a real woman, Flagg. She's as game as they come, an' pretty."

Flagg stiffened, his nostrils flaring.

"Yes—she's a pretty woman—a beautiful woman, in fact," the soldier replied, his voice brittle. "And you're a man. You rode a good many miles tonight with your arms around her. Being a young and romantic girl, June might have enjoyed that intimacy."

Monte Webb stared at him, momentarily dumbfounded by Flagg's sudden change of tone.

"Wait a minute, Flagg!" Benton said angrily. "Have you got the gall to insinuate that Webb here would take advantage of a situation just because—"

Flagg thrust Benton aside with an angry oath.

"I'm insinuating nothing!" he said grimly. "I'm just warning Webb not to get any romantic ideas in his head. June Castle is to become my wife, and I won't have any man getting notions about her!"

Sam Benton made a spluttering sound.

"Why, you jealous-hearted son—"

Monte Webb strode quickly into the breach, as he saw Ross Flagg drop a hand to his sabre hilt.

"Get out of here, Flagg!" ordered the scout. "I don't savvy why you're rowellin' me this way, an' right now I'm too tired to argue with you. Get back to camp, before Benton here tears you apart!"

His face black with anger, Flagg pushed by them, headed away from the wagons.

"I'm on watch duty till midnight," he called back sullenly, but without any hint of apology in his tone. "Remember what I told you, Webb, I'm grateful to you for what you did,

and all that—but I'll tolerate no funny business about June!"

Webb continued to hold Benton by the arm until Flagg vanished in the darkness.

"Talk about gratitude," cried Benton hotly. "You should have worked over that handsome dude with your fists, Monte. If you don't, I ain't so sure but what I will!"

Webb shrugged.

"Forget it, Sam. He's just on edge. What's on your mind? Did you come here to tell me somethin' special?"

Benton swallowed his rage and said more calmly:

"Yes, I did. I been doing some investigatin' on the trail today, Webb. Do you know who these Missourians hired to trail scout for Castle on this trip out to Oregon?"

"Reckon I don't, Sam."

"Jute Flathers, that's who!"

Webb shot him a startled look. "You don't mean the renegade who's married to Red Cloud's daughter?"

"Nobody else," Benton answered. "Jute Flathers—that booze-guzzlin' son who's known from Julesburg to Walla Walla as a rotten squaw man. His wife is Rainbow-over-the-Lake, the youngest daughter of Red Cloud. She's with him here in camp!"

Monte Webb digested this news soberly. Remembering how the wagon train had deliberately camped in a vulnerable spot in the thick of Red Cloud's country, he drew the same ominous conclusion that Benton had.

Had Rainbow-over-the-Lake gotten word to her Indian father and brought the Ogalalas to attack Castle's camp? Or, still worse, had the drunken trail scout in charge of picking out camp sites sold out to the Indians?

"I'm advising Castle to fire Flathers and pick another guide before they leave Fort Laramie," Benton said. "Unless I'm mistaken, that squaw man double-crossed those Missourians!"

The two started back toward the wagons, but Monte Webb halted as they heard the sound of gay young voices raised in song to the accompaniment of banjo and fiddle music.

"They're still celebratin' June's return," Webb said. "I'd rather face a tribe of redskins than get kissed by all them women again, Sam. I think I'll walk out an' talk things

over with this Ross Flagg jasper. I don't want any bad blood between him an' me if I can help it."

"Give him a sock for me, kid," Benton laughed. "Good-night."

Webb strode off into the night, intending to visit each of the various sentries until he could locate Ross Flagg. He had walked perhaps a hundred yards to the eastward when his acute ears caught a low murmur of voices nearby.

Nerves alert, he made his way in the direction of the voices. Undoubtedly they were lookouts. If so, they were shirking their duty by getting together to talk among themselves.

Webb halted abruptly as he came to a black gulf marking the rim of a dry wash eroded deep into the prairie. Tobacco smoke reached his nostrils. Peering down into the low-walled gulch, he saw the pink coal of a pipe, ebbing and glowing.

He opened his mouth intending to warn the men in the gulch below that any kind of a light was dangerous, out here in Indian country. If Sioux warriors did stalk up through the darkness, one arrow could put a sentinel into eternity before he could sound an alarm. A burning cigar or pipe was like a beacon to guide a creeping Indian toward a victim.

Then Webb clamped his jaw shut, as the hoarse undertone became intelligible:

"I tell you, there's a young fortune in gold in that keg in Castle's second wagon—the one his wife drives."

"How are you so certain o' that, friend?" came a second voice, belonging to the owner of the pipe.

"Because all of these Missouri folks pooled their money before they pulled out of Pike Country, understand? They knew they'd need cash out in Oregon, and they decided it'd be safer to carry it with them."

"You seen the money yourself?"

"With my own eyes. It's waiting there for the taking, men. Coins and gold dust. Gideon Castle is responsible for it as the community banker, sort of. He sleeps alongside that keg of nights."

There was a moment's silence following the speaker's words. Monte Webb dropped a hand to a gun butt as the stunning realization shot through him that he was listening in on a conspiracy. Nerves taut, he edged closer to the rim of the gulch.

" It'd be as simple as rolling off a log," the speaker continued.

" The three of us could go up to Gid's wagon. One thrust of a knife, and he'd be out of the picture. The three of us could tote that keg away an'—"

The speaker broke off, as a little avalanche of sand and pebbles showered down off the rimrock.

At the same instant, Monte Webb felt loose shale giving way beneath his weight, as he halted on the thin shell of the under-cut bank.

Even as the scout snatched .44 from leather, he felt the crumbling soil collapse beneath him, and he plummeted downward in a landslide of broken earth and rubble.

His catapulting body bowled over two of the squatting men crouched in the pit of the gulch.

" What in—"

Desperately, Webb propped himself up on one elbow, caring back the hammer of the Dragoon .44. Before he could press trigger a hobnailed boot lashed out, knocking the six-gun from his hand.

Iron-muscled hands seized him by either forearm, and a gun muzzle was rammed against his ribs with a force that drove the air from his lungs. At the same time a rock-knuckled fist slammed hard against his temple, stunning him beyond resistance.

" Bellerin' bullfrawgs!" sounded a voice, oddly remote in his ears. " This is that Monte Webb feller that brung June in—"

" You reckon he heard anything just now?"

A foul, whisky-laden breath beat agai' st the back of Webb's neck, as he felt the prick of a bowie knife's point against his spine.

" Makes no difference, men!" came a husky whisper from the knifeman. " Monte Webb's got to be killed, any-how!"

CHAPTER IV

DEATH IN THE DARK

The sting of the knife point slicing through his buckskins snapped Monte Webb out of his dazed torpor a split second before the blade could begin its thrust toward his heart.

With a violent sideward twist, the army scout lunged out from under the stabbing arm, his unexpected jerk freeing his right arm from the grasp of his assailant. With incredible speed, Webb's arm shot out to knock the six-gun barrel away from his stomach. Then he was down on his knees, shoulders knocking the gunman off balance.

Grunting with desperation, Webb rolled over on his back and drew up his legs, lashing out with both boots as he felt the trio of conspirators close in upon him.

He felt his heels smash flesh and bone, as they landed home on a whisker-matted face. The victim of his point-blank kick squalled like a wild cat, his cry re-echoing from the shale walls.

Despair clawed at Webb's heart. He had put one of the three out of the way, but there still remained the knife toter and the man who had held the gun. He knew he had scant chance to get out of the gully with his life. Attack had come too swiftly for him to take refuge in flight; in his dazed condition, he knew a bullet would have dropped him within a few steps.

Then a silhouetted figure loomed against the rim of the cut bank where Webb had broken the ledge, and down out of the night came the ringing voice of Sam Benton.

"Webb! What's goin' on down there?"

The knifeman with whom Monte Webb was grappling broke free with a terrific backward lunge, battering the scout's face with a bunched fist.

Before Webb could regain his balance, he saw the knifeman leap past him, headed in retreat down the twisting pit of the dry wash.

"They're owlhooters, Sam!" Webb yelled. "Don't let 'em get out o' here——"

Unable to see anything down in the shadow-blocked pit of the dry wash, Benton hauled a Navy-model Colt from his belt scabbard and scrambled down the short cut bank, eyes probing the gloom for a glimpse of a target.

Monte Webb looked around swiftly. His ears recorded a swift tattoo of footsteps, as the outlaw who had held the gun to his stomach fled down the cut bank after his companion.

Then, dimly visible against the alkali bottom of the dry wash, Webb caught sight of the third conspirator scrambling to his feet, starlight glinting on the blood which covered his face.

Gun steel rasped from leather, as the plotter swung into a crouch, peering through the gloom at the scout.

His own gun lost somewhere underfoot, Webb charged forward, bowie knife upraised. Even as he did so, he saw the outlaw's gun come up, heard the click of a hammer being drawn to full cock. At point-blank range, the killer could not miss——

But the injured outlaw had not reckoned on Sam Benton. The latter, his eyes now accustomed to the thick darkness, recognized Webb's moving figure, and saw the Colt levelled upon it.

Flame spat from the bore of Benton's .36-calibered weapon, and Webb saw his would-be slayer pitch sideways. The outlaw's Colt roared deafeningly, but the bullet intended for Webb thudded harmlessly into the opposite wall of the gulch.

Doggedly, the killer sought to lift his gun again. Then, knees buckling like rubber hinges, he sprawled like a hewn tree on the floor of the gulch, smoke leaking from the muzzle of the Colt which he still gripped in lifeless, twitching fingers.

"Webb—you all right?" yelled Benton, leaping forward to seize his friend's hand. "What happened here, anyhow? Who were those buskies?"

Monte Webb peered off to the northward, along the twisting black gulf of the coulee. The sound of retreating footsteps could no longer be heard.

"I wish I knew who they were," Webb answered, groping about in the sand until he had recovered his own .44 Dragoon. "It's lucky for me one of 'em yelled when I kicked his face in, or I'd have been buzzard bait by now. What were you doing out here?"

"Well," Benton admitted, "as a matter of fact, I snuck back here in the hope I'd get to see you beat Flagg to a jelly. I was squattin' down, tryin' to spot you two against the horizon, when I heard somebody yell holy murder. What happened?"

Webb grinned ruefully, fingering a swollen welt on his temple, where a fist had very nearly knocked him cold.

"Three jaspers were hunkered down here talkin' over a scheme to murder Gideon Castle. That cut bank gave way, and I piled down on top of 'em. They was fixin' to knife me--an' that was when you heard the yell. Lucky for me you did."

Webb shuddered, realizing that the entire fray had consumed only about thirty seconds. Without the providential appearance of Sam Benton, whose arrival had put the two conspirators to flight, the scout knew he would be a dead man by now.

"You say they were plottin' to kill Gideon Castle?" Benton questioned. "Why?"

Briefly, Webb explained the snatches of conversation he had overheard, regarding the fact that Castle's wagon contained a keg filled with the money which the wagon train's families had trusted to their leader for safe keeping.

"Jehoshaphat!" cried Benton. "No wonder those skunks were set on cashin' in your chips for you. Know who they were?"

Webb shook his head. Now that his senses were beginning to clear, he realized for the first time that in the heat of the mêlée he had obtained no clue to the identity of the men who had planned Gideon Castle's murder.

"Bein' a total stranger to the people in that wagon train, I wouldn't have known the three men even if it'd been daylight," Webb said. "Let's have a look see at this wolf you shot."

The two Laramie scouts made their way over to the huddled bulk of the man slain by Benton's bullet.

Webb struck a match, and the two men stared down at the dead man, his face bloodied by Webb's well-placed kicks.

It was a repellent face, the heavy jowls furred with a mat of wheat-coloured beard. The man wore a bright-red hunting shirt and home-spun trousers, and girdling his waist was an

elkhide belt. A cap-and-ball pistol protruded from a cutaway holster.

"Flagg might be mixed up in this, Webb!" Benton remarked as the match flickered out in Webb's fingers. "I wouldn't put anything past that skunk, after the display o' yellowness he put on with you."

"If one o' those jaspers *was* Flagg, he may try to skip out tonight—or he might try to murder Castle right away!" answered Monte Webb. "We'd better make tracks back to the wagons and warn Castle!"

The emigrants were beginning to scatter out to their various wagons to settle down for the night, by the time the two scouts arrived back at the dying camp-fire, by whose flames June Castle had been welcomed to safety once more.

Lamplight still glowed inside the tent pitched alongside the three Castle wagons. As Webb and Benton approached, they found Gideon Castle engaged in whispered conversation with Ross Flagg, the latter breathing heavily as if he had been running.

The two scouts strode up with hands poised on six-gun butts, but Flagg showed no signs of hostility.

"Benton!" gasped old man Castle, as he recognized the scout by the glow of the lighted tent. "I'm just debating whether or not to sound an alarm. Ross here heard two shots fired out on the prairie a few minutes ago!"

Flagg pointed off in the direction of the dry wash.

"The shots came from out of that direction, Benton," he explained. "I was on night guard duty—it was shortly after I left the two of you. I'm positive I heard two shots fired, but Castle here said there was so much noise in camp, what with the music and all, that no one heard anything——"

"You figger it was Injuns?" demanded Castle.

Webb shook his head. Looking straight at Ross Flagg, so as to be able to catch any tell-tale flick of a facial muscle or any gunward motion of his hand, the scout fired a question at Gideon Castle—one apparently unrelated to the shots in the night:

"Castle, did Flagg here know about that keg of gold you're carryin' in your wagon?"

Castle stiffened, his eyes widening in surprise and confusion. Flagg only looked puzzled by Webb's question.

"No, he didn't," the wagon captain said. "Nobody but members o' the council, an' myself, knew that—an' they were pledged to keep secret the spot where we hid it. How in tarnation did you even know we was carryin' gold, son?"

The two scouts exchanged disappointed glances. Flagg, then, could not have been the leader of the plotters.

Tensely, Webb told Castle of his accidental discovery of the conspiracy, and the brief struggle which had ensued. By the time he had finished his recital, Castle was chalk-faced with alarm.

"The man Benton shot was Alabama Jones, one of our cattle drovers, judging from that description," the old Missourian finally found his voice. "But who were the other skunks?"

"One must have been a council man, since they knew about that cached gold," said Benton. "We'd better make a round of the wagons, an' see if any of them are missin'!"

Castle turned to Flagg. "You go from wagon to wagon, countin' noses," he ordered. "If any man not out on sentry duty is missin', report back to me. You take the west half o' the circle, and I'll take the east. We got to work fast."

Flagg headed off along the wagons, calling the various heads of families by name. Castle, meanwhile, strode in the opposite direction, checking up on the men who were spreading their bedrolls under wagon boxes, while their children and wives, for the most part, slept inside the shelter of the hooded wagon boxes.

Sam Benton and Monte Webb followed the Missourian, their suspense growing as wagon after wagon was checked on. In each case, the men belonging to a wagon were present or accounted for on guard duty.

At length, a quarter of the way around the arc of prairie schooners, Castle turned to face the two scouts in the darkness.

"I been doin' some thinkin'," said the oldster. "Alabama Jones, the man you shot, wouldn't have known about that keg of money in my wagon, Benton. He joined up with the caravan at Julesburg, as a drover. But I got a hunch—"

"Let's have it," demanded Benton impatiently. "Every minute we lose, we're givin' those two devils a chance to get back to where they belong."

Lowering his voice so as not to alarm the family engaged

in settling themselves for the night at the nearest wagon, Gideon Castle said:

“Alabama Jones joined up with us along with a mule skinner named Grote Kettleman. We needed a blacksmith to repair wagons, so we hired Kettleman for the job. There’s ugly rumours goin’ the rounds that Kettleman was wanted for a saloon killin’ back in Julesburg. It’s my hunch that if anybody was plottin’ to kill me, it would be Kettleman. I know every other man in this wagon train intimately, an’ there ain’t a criminal in the lot.”

Monte Webb’s pulse raced. Here, at last, was a definite clue to follow. The fact that one of the trio of conspirators was known to be a henchman of Kettleman’s, coupled with the fact that Castle had implicit faith in the good character of his Missouri neighbours, pointed a finger of suspicion at the Julesburg blacksmith.

“Where’s this Kettleman’s wagon?” Webb asked excitedly. “If he ain’t in his blankets when we get there, we’ll have every reason for believing he was one of these toughs.”

Gideon Castle strode grimly forward along the line of wagons, which were placed end to end as protection against Indian attack.

A moment later he paused alongside a prairie schooner. Heavy snores could be heard issuing from a bedroll spread on the ground between the wheels.

“This is where Kettleman an’ Alabama Jones bunk,” whispered Castle. “Their wagon contains a forge an’ blacksmithin’ tools they intend to open a shop with, out in Oregon.”

Monte Webb eased his .44 from holster as he and Benton approached Kettleman’s wagon, on either side of Castle.

The old wagon captain struck a match, and its flare revealed a black-whiskered man rolled up in a patchwork quilt under the wagon. Nearby was another bedroll, significantly empty—the blankets belonging to Alabama Jones, who now lay dead out in the bed of the dry wash where conspirators had met to plot against Castle’s life.

Grote Kettleman grunted and sat up, rubbing his eyes with a knuckle and regarding the three men before him with the grogginess of one just coming out of slumber.

“What yuh want, Gid?” he asked, yawning.

"Where's your pardner—Alabama?" Castle demanded sharply.

Kettleman glanced at the empty bedroll beside him, and pointed off toward the prairie.

"He drawed a watchman's job until midnight," replied the blacksmith. "Why? Has he been drinkin' again?"

Castle glanced over at Monte Webb, who shook his head disappointedly.

"Kettleman wasn't one of the three," the scout said positively. "He must weigh two hundred and fifty pounds, easy. I know I wasn't wrasslin' with a giant his size."

Castle blew out the match and withdrew, leaving the blacksmith to stare after the departing trio in wonderment.

"Wait a minute," said Webb, when they had withdrawn out of Kettleman's hearing. "You say you trust every man in your train, Castle. Well, we know at least two men *aren't* to be trusted."

Castle groaned. "I'd trust any one of 'em like my own son," he said. "Most of 'em were neighbours o' mine in Pike County. Many of 'em I've knowed for twenty years or more; the others come recommended by my neighbours. There ain't any murderers among 'em. I'd take my oath on that!"

"How about Jute Flathers, your trail guide?"

Webb's question made Castle jerk erect, startled.

"Why—we hired him at Independence, before we set off on this trek," admitted Castle. "I know you're agin' Flathers, Benton, because he's a squaw man. Major Scott told me this evenin' he wouldn't be surprised if Jute Flathers didn't betray us to the Injuns last night. But Flathers had no way o' knowin' about that keg o' gold in my wagon."

Webb paused, thinking hard. If they eliminated Flathers from the list of suspects, they might as well give up the job of identifying the night's conspirators as a hopeless one.

"Tell me where Flathers camps—which wagon is his," Webb suggested. "While you an' Benton are checkin' on the other families, I'll go over and see if Flathers is missin' or not."

Castle took the scout's arm and pointed directly across the herd of oxen and mules corralled inside the circle of wagons.

"See that big star yonder on the horizon? Steer a beeline

for it an' you'll spot a little canvas tent, pitched outside the wagons. 'That's where Flathers an' his squaw live. Him bein' our trail scout, he don't have a wagon."

Leaving Benton and the old wagon captain to continue their wagon-to-wagon search for a possible missing man, Monte Webb headed across the enclosure, guiding himself through the bedded-down animals by means of the star Castle had indicated.

A minute later, crawling between the tail gate and the tongue of two prairie schooners, Webb made out the outlines of a small wigwam-shaped tent, erected a few hundred feet south of the wagons.

Loosening his .44 in holster, the scout made his way swiftly toward the tent. Now, at last, he had something definite to work on. He knew the breed of renegade he was dealing with; he had encountered Flathers more than once in the past, and he knew the ruthless character of the squaw man.

Come to think of it, Jute Flathers was a very logical suspect to play the rôle of the pipe-smoking conspirator with whom Webb had fought. The squaw man if approached by a potential killer with a plan to murder Gideon Castle in return for one third of the money which was in the Missourian's possession, would undoubtedly agree.

A lantern glowed inside the canvas tepee, and as Monte Webb came within earshot of the tent, he heard Jute Flathers' grating voice lifted in anger:

"You red-skinned little w^tch! Danged if I ain't goin' to chop you up an' sling you out for the coyotes to chaw!"

A woman's muffled scream followed Flathers' outburst. Webb leaped forward, gun in hand as he approached the open flap of the tent door. Jerking aside the fly, he stared at the scene before him. For a moment he was so aghast he could not move.

Rainbow-Over-the-Lake, the copper-skinned Indian woman whom Flathers had married, was on her knees before the Oregon Trail scout.

Flathers, a lean-framed man in his early forties, clutched the squaw's sleek black hair in his left fist. The trail guide's right arm was upraised, and in it he held a glittering double-bitted axe.

"Flathers! Drop that axe!"

The stubbly-jawed renegade whirled about as Monte Webb's voice lashed the smoky confines of the tent, and his florid countenance went ashen-grey, as he stared at the round black bore of the six-gun in the scout's hand.

The stench of whisky was heavy in the tent. Flathers' eyes were red-rimmed, his cheeks inflamed with alcohol. Obviously, he had been about to slay his wife in a fit of drunken rage.

The Indian woman extricated herself from her husband's talon-like fingers and crawled away like a crippled animal. Flathers stared at Webb, his knuckles turning yellowish-white as he redoubled his grip on the axe handle.

"It's Monte Webb ag'in, eh?" he rapsed, his voice thick with rage. "Hornin' into my personal business, eh? Well, take this, blast you!"

As he spoke, Flathers hurled the double-bitted axe with all his force, straight at the scout.

CHAPTER V

DEAD-END TRAIL

Webb checked his trigger finger as he dropped flat on his face, under the very whistling path of the hurtling axe. There was a sharp ripping noise, as the steel blade slashed a gaping rent in the tent and thudded on the rocky ground outside with a metallic clang.

Before Webb could get to his feet, Flathers charged at him, pawing a long-bladed skinning knife from his belt.

Leaping sideways, Webb thrust out an arm to trip the charging squaw man before the downward swipe of the knife could find a target.

An instant later the scout had reached across to club Flathers sharply across the skull with his six-gun barrel. The trail scout slumped, eyes glazed with insensibility.

His lungs heaving with exertion, Webb got to his feet and stared across the tent to where Flathers' squaw was cringing in abject terror amid a pile of buffalo robes. Stark horror, mixed with a glow of gratitude, made black pools of the Indian woman's eyes.

"Don't be afraid of me, Rainbow-Over-the-Lake," Webb said, speaking in the guttural Ogalala dialect. "What was going on here? Why was Flathers going to kill you?"

Rainbow-Over-the-Lake stood up, gathering her blanket about her. Webb got a glimpse of half-healed scars across her back and shoulder, and knew that the squaw had felt the fury of her white husband's wrath before.

"Jute, him heap drunk tonight," the woman said wearily. Her voice held no trace of anger or resentment, only dull resignation to her lot. "Jute going to tomahawk his woman. You save my life. Tonight, I pray to Great Spirit to bless you."

Webb frowned, turning his gaze back to Jute Flathers. The man entrusted with the job of guiding the Missouri wagons over prairie and mountain to the shores of the Pacific was a sorry spectacle, clad in grimy underwear and fringed

buckskin pants. Blood trickled from a cut on his baldish scalp, where Webb's six-gun had landed.

"Tell me, Rainbow-Over-the-Lake," Webb said, "Why was Jute going to kill you just now?"

The squaw shrugged.

"I tell him, if he get drunk and beat me again, I tell white chief of wagons where he hide his fire water. White chief, him name' Castle, no like for scout to have whisky with him."

Webb squatted down, his friendly eyes winning the squaw's confidence.

"Has Jute been inside this wigwam all evening, Rainbow?" he asked. He felt a stab of disappointment shoot through him as the squaw replied with an earnestness that precluded any hint of falsehood:

"Yes. After we eat supper with palefaces, I set up tent, like every night. Jute, he start drinking fire water before sun go down. He go to sleep. I go to take off Jute's moccasins. He wake up, get angry like rattlesnake. He grab axe, say he chop Rainbow into pieces for coyotes to chaw. Then you come."

Webb felt a strong pull of sympathy for the maltreated little Sioux woman. Life with the most vicious brave of her own tribe would be infinitely better than the cruelties she sustained uncomplainingly at the hands of the depraved Flathers.

Her words, at any rate, removed the squaw man from any part in the night's conspiracy. If Jute Flathers had been drinking and asleep since sunset, he could not have been a member of the trio Webb had overheard plotting against Castle's life.

And then, remembering Sam Benton's suspicions regarding the part Flathers might have played in the previous night's Indian attack, Webb asked:

"You are daughter of great Ogalala chief, Red Cloud. I see you in Red Cloud's lodge when I trade furs with Injuns, years ago. You remember?"

The squaw nodded, her bright black eyes fixed on the slumped figure of her husband.

"Is Jute a friend of your father, Red Cloud, or not?"

Rainbow-Over-the-Lake shook her head negatively.

"Did Jute," persisted Monte Webb, "know that Red

Cloud and his warriors were after white men's scalps last night?"

The daughter of the Sioux chief tore her gaze away from Flathers and met Webb's gaze without blinking. By her ebony-dark eyes, wistful in the guttering firelight inside the tent, Webb knew instinctively that the squaw was speaking truthfully as she answered him:

"Jute, he bad man when he full of fire water. But Jute, he not betray his own people to the Indian. Jute did not know my father's tribe was going to attack. Red Cloud is enemy of Jute because Jute, he pay for me with sick horses when he take me away to share his tepee."

Monte Webb got to his feet. He was conscious of a deep sense of disappointment. The squaw's testimony had not only cleared Jute Flathers of complicity in the night's conspiracy, but had disproved Benton's suspicions as to the guide's reliability.

As an overland scout, Flathers was efficient enough. The next day's travel would see the caravan safely to Fort Laramie, and the country beyond Laramie, while infested with warlike Cheyennes and Shoshones, was outside Red Cloud's range.

"Thank you, Rainbow," Webb said. "I reckon I'll go now. Shall I tie up Jute before I leave?"

Rainbow-Over-the-Lake shook her head, and crept forward to drape a buffalo robe over her unconscious husband.

"When Jute wake up, he forget all about axe. Jute, he all right in morning. He guide paleface wagons tomorrow."

Stepping over the renegade's inert body, Webb walked back to the wagons, to find that quiet had settled over the Oregon Trail camp.

A few yards inside the circular corral of wagons he joined Gideon Castle and Sam Benton. The two were engaged in whispered conversation with Ross Flagg.

"We've made the rounds of every wagon in the train, Webb," reported Castle. "Looks as if we're up against a dead-end trail in findin' out whoall was aimin' to rob me. Unless you found Jute Flathers missin' from his squaw's tent just now."

Briefly, Monte Webb described his interview with the Ogalala squaw. He omitted any reference to Flathers' drunkenness, merely saying that the trail guide was asleep.

"Anyway, I'm forewarned about the gold," Castle said. "I won't disturb the members of the train by telling them what happened tonight. I'm just glad it was Alabama Jones who got salivated, Webb, an' not you. I reckon my wife and I will spend the rest o' our lives in your debt, young man. I ain't ever forg'ttin' what you done for June."

Ten minutes later, Monte Webb was looking for his bedroll, which had been spread out for him in a portion of the camp where the Fort Laramie troops were sleeping. But, weary as he was, the scout went to bed with secret misgivings. Somewhere among the people who were heading to Oregon for a new start on a new frontier, at least two traitors lurked—killers, who would undoubtedly strike without warning, somewhere along the thousand-mile trek which lay ahead.

A sentinel's gunshot at half-past-four the next morning started the wagon train's daily routine, and the monotony of getting under way, which had been repeated scores of times since the caravaneers had left civilization at Independence, was now salted with excitement.

The presence of Major Scott and his Fort Laramie troops served as an ever-present reminder of their first Indian raid; but the families who had lost one or more loved ones in the fray sought to forget their sorrow in the sheer toil of breaking camp.

For June Castle, recovering from the nerve-shattering ordeal of her Indian capture, the activities which began before daylight had taken on a new meaning. She saw behind the bantering and the jostling camaraderie, and realized the necessity for the unity and co-operation which before she had taken as a matter of course, as a part of the gay adventure of westward travel so foreign to the sheltered life she had lived for eighteen years in Hannibal, along the placid Mississippi.

These pioneers—her friends and neighbours, who had elected her father to the responsibility of captaining the Oregon-bound community—were braving the elements and the horror of Indian attack to help extend the course of American empire.

New homes in the virgin West could not be won save at the cost of blood and sweat and gruelling labour; and with each turn of a wagon spoke, their destination on the Pacific slope was coming closer to reality.

The first glint of dawn over the Wyoming hills found the breakfast fires lighted, fuelled with buffalo chips and dry grass. Herders, led by Grote Kettleman, were moving the cattle off the bedground, preparatory to the day's run.

Teamsters were yoking oxen, harnessing mules; wagons were being drawn into platoons of fifteen each, and in keeping with the custom of the overland trail, the lead wagons of yesterday's trek would be at the tail end, or dusty position, of the caravan today.

Throughout the bustling activity after breakfast, during which women and children were being loaded aboard wagons and some of the younger men had mounted horses and sallied forth in search of buffalo, June Castle's gaze was busy sweeping over the milling throng.

Her mother, noting the girl's restlessness, frowned slightly. With a woman's intuition, she knew the cause of June's abstraction, knew it did not have its roots in the nervous ordeal she had endured the day before as a captive of the Sioux chief.

"You will not be forgetting, child," she said quietly, as she and June busied themselves storing cans of butter and bacon slabs in boxes of bran, which would prevent the heat of the day's travel melting them, "that you have promised Captain Flagg you will be his bride, when we reach Oregon?"

June whirled about, dropping an India-rubber bag in which the family's sugar supply was carried. On the trail, sugar was one of the most precious commodities, but the girl did not seem to notice the white grains cascading out on the grass.

"Mother—why do you remind me of that?" she asked stiffly.

Mrs. Castle pretended to busy herself with the chin strings of her gingham sunbonnet.

"You were almost—shall I say—cool to Captain Flagg when he came to the wagon to inquire about you this morning," her mother said with gentle reproof. Then her expression changed as she looked past her daughter and forced herself to smile. "Good morning, Mr. Webb. For the new hero of the caravan, you were permitted but little time to sleep last night, were you not?"

June turned quickly, to see Monte Webb riding up on his sleek, cat-hammed sorrel. With the ruddy light of sunrise

striking his clean-chiselled face and glinting off his cartridge belt and booted rifle stock, the army scout made a striking figure. He tipped his flat-crowned hat and smiled.

"Top of the mornin', Mrs. Castle. And how are you feelin' after your little visit with the Ogallalas, Miss June?"

The girl laughed, colouring slightly under the frank approval of his gaze.

"Except that my wrists ache where the ropes chafed them, and I haven't caught up on sleep yet, I feel as pert as a two-year old!" she laughed. "When will we reach your fort, Mr. Webb?"

Webb hopped about in the saddle, resting his brawny gauntleted hands on the saddlehorn. It was the first time June had been able to study his clear-cut profile in daylight, and she experienced a sensation almost akin to guilt as she found herself subconsciously comparing the scout's strong chin and aquiline nose with Captain Fliggs' thinner nostrils and receding jaw.

"It's fifteen miles as the crow flies," Webb answered. "With this early start, an' allowin' for no breakdowns, I figure you folks can reach the stockade at Laramie by dark."

Hoof beats sounded behind them, and Grid on Castle, his hat brim flopping and his beard tugging in the wind, drew even alongside his wife's wagon.

"Get rollin', folks!" the Missourian boomed. "We're in the third bunch o' wagons, mother. Don't hold up the parade!"

June climbed reluctantly into the second of the Conestoga wagons belonging to her family, to take up the oxgad. Men had already yoked the span to her wagon, the tent had been struck, rolled and packed.

Had the girl glanced back through the oval-shaped opening in the wagon hood behind her, she might have noticed her father busily rearranging the farming tools, sacks of seed wheat, furniture and other freight. She did not know that before daylight the oaken keg containing the community's gold had been transferred to another hiding place in the caravan.

As the wagons got under way, Castle spurred over to Monte Webb, to explain the precautions he had taken with the gold, following the scout's alarming discovery of the night before.

"We got an old cooper named Zeke Pritchett travellin' in the train—one of our councilmen," Castle explained. "His wagon is loaded with bar'l's an' kegs of all descriptions, full o' nails an' vinegar an' gun powder an' sechlike. By hidin' the keg o' gold amongst all them other bar'l's, we figgered it'd be a heap safer—an' we can trust Pritchett all the way."

Webb nodded his approval of the scheme.

"Just the same, keep a stirrup eye peeled of nights, from here on out," the scout warned. "Not knowing you transferred that gold, the murderer may try to steal it yet."

Castle galloped away toward his place at the head of the wagon train. Along the wagons went the traditional calls ringing from driver to driver "Westward ho!" "Oregon or bust!"

To Webb, the moving of the cask of gold brought relief. Its new location would be kept a secret, even to members of the community council of old and trusted men who administered the government of the wagon train.

Monte Webb spurred away from the wagons as they headed out of the camp ground, following the ruts of countless hundreds of other prairie schooners which had preceded them into the Western outlands.

Approaching the squad of cavalrymen who had assembled north of the line of travel, the buckskin-clad army scout saluted as he drew even betw' em horses mounted by his superior, Major Scott, and his fellow scout, Sam Benton.

"With your permission, major, I'll stay behind a spell today," Webb said. "I'll report in at the fort later today."

The military commander appraised his scout quizzically, then glanced at Benton.

"Something to do with last night's shooting scrape?" he asked. "If so ——"

"Alabama Jones has already been buried, Webb," interrupted Benton. "We didn't tell anyone except his partner, Grote Kettleman. Didn't want to disturb folks unnecessarily."

Monte Webb nodded approval. He tugged mechanically at the chin strap of his beaver hat.

"I aim to study the sign over in the gully," he told Major Scott. "Daylight ought to tell me a few things I been honin' to know, after last night."

Major Scott nodded, gathering up his reins.

"You have my permission to remain here as long as you wish," he said. "Good luck to you, son."

Thus it was, a half-hour later, Monte Webb saw the ninety-odd wagons of the Missouri caravan move off toward the north-west in six equal platoons, to the accompaniment of loud yells, the popping of whips, and the creaking of wheels on axles.

When the morning breeze had cleared the mammoth cloud of dust from the camp ground, Webb spurred back over the sagebrush flats, his eyes slitted in thought.

Years of frontier life had schooled the young scout in the intricacies of reading sign. His father had once boasted proudly that his young'un, Monte, could track an eagle's shadow over badlands that an Indian wouldn't tackle.

A few minutes later, Webb was spurring his sorrel down into the dry wash where, the night before, he had fought for his life against unknown adversaries.

A mound of fresh dug earth where the army men had buried the outlaw drover, Alabama Jones, showed Webb the spot where the fight had been interrupted by Sam Benton.

Reading sign, Webb picked up Benton's mocassin prints, and the cavalry boots of the men who had dug the grave.

Spur tracks accompanying another set of tracks told Webb that Ross Flagg had been present at the burial that morning. Another set of tracks, hobnailed and bigger than the ordinary, had probably been made by Gideon Castle.

But Webb was not interested in the spot where he had overheard the three conspirators talking in the night. He moved on up the gully, his eyes studying the fresh-dried mud.

Two sets of footprints were clearly visible there. They belonged, respectively, to Sam Benton and Captain Ross Flagg; and they were less than an hour old, for the wind which had swept through the gully during the night had not yet erased their outlines.

"Which means," Webb muttered aloud, "that Sam an' Flagg did some huntin' this mornin' to find the tracks o' the two jaspers who ran away last night."

The scout dismounted, ground-tying his sorrel. Walking along the pit of the gulch, he searched every inch of ground

in the hope of finding a footprint which had escaped the shifting sand of the night winds.

The two conspirators who had raced off into the night had left tracks, and in so doing had left their signature in the sand; a signature which could be analyzed and identified by a man experienced in reading sign.

About a hundred yards from the grave of Alabama Jones, Webb saw where Benton and Flagg, despairing of locating any sign, had climbed out of the gully to return to camp.

But Webb, pushing on with doubled attentiveness, found what he had been seeking: long gouges in the soft shale, where the murder plotters of the night before had scrambled up over the low rim of the cut bank.

Pulse quickening, Webb knelt to study the long scratches in the soil, hoping to locate a clearly defined footprint. Then, abruptly, he stiffened, as a man's shadow fell across the gully from behind him. A harsh voice lashed out:

"Turn around with your hands reachin' fer a cloud, Webb. One booger move toward that six-gun you're packin', an' I'll blast you from hell to breakfast!"

Every nerve and sinew taut, Webb turned slowly, arms elevated to the level of his hat brim. He looked up into the levelled barrel of a Sharps buffalo rifle. Squinting down the sights were the murderous, red-rimmed eyes of Jute Flathers.

CHAPTER VI

DOOM WRITTEN IN SMOKE

Keeping the big-bored rifle aimed at Webb's chest, the stubbly-chinned trail guide slid his way down the east bank of the gully in a clatter of pebbles.

Behind Flathers, its reins tethered by a rock, stood the guide's ribby black Indian pony, its flanks lathered from hard and fast riding.

"What's this, Flathers?" demanded Webb, as the squaw man advanced to jab the muzzle of the Sharps against his stomach. "You're supposed to be pickin' out the best trail for Castle's wagons to follow!"

Flathers exposed a battery of crooked, tobacco-stained teeth, in a grin which reminded Webb of a coyote's fangs. Raw hatred gleamed in the guide's close-set, gooseberry-coloured eyes.

"The devil with that, Webb!" Flathers snarled. "I allus ride five, ten, mile ahead o' the wagons, an' I allus pull out a half hour ahead o' the train. Nobody knows I circled back here to camp."

Icy sweat trickled down Webb's face at the venom in Flathers' tone. The trail guide's head was swathed in a crude bandage, covering the welt which Webb's clubbing pistol barrel had raised on his temple the night before.

"I figgpered you might be back here snoopin' around for tracks," Flathers sneered. "Mebbe this'll teach you not to trust the word of an Injun squaw, Webb!"

The taunt made Webb's jaw sag open, as understanding flooded his brain. Flathers, then, had been one of the trio of conspirators of the night before!

Despair clawed at Webb's heart as he remembered his interview with Flathers' Indian wife, the night before. He had taken the word of Rainbow-Over-the-Lake at face value when she told him that her renegade husband had been in their tent since sundown, drinking himself into insensibility.

"I ain't forgettin' the clout you give me after I heaved

that axe," Flathers rasped. "After you left, my squaw brung me to. She told me all o' the questions you heaved at her. I knowed, the minute I spotted you in our tent, that you figgered I'd just come back from this gulch."

Monte Webb nodded, his eyes bitter.

"I reckon I don't think any the less o' Rainbow, for lyin' to save your mangy carcass, Jute," admitted the scout. "If I hadn't showed up, you'd have chopped her head open. In spite of that, when a showdown came, Rainbow lied her head off—and I believed her. I didn't know any woman was capable o' love like that, Jute."

Flathers grinned, and thrust out his left hand, intending to lift the scout's gun from leather. As he did so, Webb brought both arms down in a blurring movement that caught Flathers off guard.

The heavy Sharps roared like a cannon between them, but the heavy leaden slug pounded into the shale wall behind them as Webb's hands, locked about the barrel of the buffalo gun, wrenched the muzzle away from his body.

With gunsmoke biting his nostrils and stinging his eyes, Webb lunged his shoulder against Flathers, even as the renegade's fingers coiled about the stock of the six-gun in Webb's holster.

Grunting, Flathers lost his footing and the two went down, Webb's right hand locking on the trail guide's hairy wrist before Flathers could drag the .44 from its holster.

Rolling over and over in the sand, locked in a grapple, but unable to use their hands because each maintained a grip on the smoking Sharps, Webb and Flathers crashed hard against the foot of the east bank.

Flathers brought up a knee, striking Webb a paralyzing blow in the side. Wilted with pain, the army scout released his grip on the buffalo gun and hammered desperately at Flathers' jaw.

The two men were a match for each other in bulk and reach, but Jute Flathers' wiry strength had been fortified with whisky. The stimulant counted now, as Flathers swung the barrel of the rifle in a clumsy sideswiping movement toward Webb's head and neck.

Unable to fend off the clubbing rifle barrel, yet unwilling to release his grip on Flathers' other wrist, Webb struggled to

his feet, rearing upward and bringing Flathers erect with him.

The renegade's whisky-fouled breath was a hot blast in Webb's face. Through a screen of tangled hair, Webb pushed off the Sharps bludgeon, then hammered a knuckle-balled fist at Flathers' hawklike countenance.

But Flathers had been schooled in the frontier bar-room style of battle. In primitive struggle there were no holds barred, no technique, however foul, beyond the squaw man's use.

Jabbing the rifle barrel upward against Webb's throat, Flathers leaped backward and tore his other hand free of the younger man's grasp. And locked in Flathers' fist was Webb's only firearm, the Dragoon .44.

"Back, you!" screeched the outlaw, thumbing the revolver to full cock. "I'd as soon blast ye to——"

But Monte Webb knew that Flathers would grant him no quarter, once the trail guide got out of range of his opponent's hammering fists.

Ducking his chin low to shield his bleeding throat, Webb charged into the very muzzle of the six-gun.

But Flathers did not shoot. He side-stepped deftly, and as Webb sought to grapple with him and hang on until his spinning senses had cleared, the renegade brought the six-gun up and slashed viciously at Webb's forehead.

Stunned, his eyes blinded by a downward gush of blood from his cut scalp, Webb collapsed at Flathers' feet.

Jabbing the .44 into the waistband of his jeans, Flathers ran over to where Webb's pony had been a nervous witness of his master's defeat. A bowie knife glittered in the sunlight as Flathers slashed a cluster of twenty-inch rawhide saddle strings from the pommel of Webb's rig.

Returning to his victim, Flathers yanked Webb's arms behind his back and knotted his wrists together securely with the leather thongs.

Then, prodding Webb to his feet with the muzzle of his buffalo rifle, Flathers snarled impatiently:

"Get astraddle of your cayuse, Webb. I ain't killin' ya here an' now. I got better plans for you."

Too dazed with pain to try to figure out Flathers' threat, Webb lurched toward his horse. With the renegade's help he managed to get aboard the stirrups.

He was groggily aware of Flathers leading his sorrel up out of the gulch. Then the squaw man tied a lasso rope to the bit ring of the pony's bridle.

That done, Flathers tied saddle strings together for added length, and then fastened Webb's ankles together under the sorrel's belly.

The next hour was a series of detached nightmares for Monte Webb. He knew only that they were riding north-east, away from the Oregon Trail and toward the Platte country they had left the day before. Then, as his senses cleared so that he could think rationally, Webb's bewilderment increased.

Why hadn't Jute Flathers killed him back in the gully? Why had the squaw man deliberately refrained from shooting him, before his capture or during their brief struggle?

Webb got his first inkling as to the grim purpose back of Flathers' ride back into the Wyoming wastelands, when the guide headed for the top of a low pinnacle of ground, the crest of which was a tangle of rocks, sagebrush and wild rose.

They had ridden fully ten miles from the camp site of the night before, and Monte Webb recognized terrain which he had travelled in bringing June Castle back from Chief Red Cloud's village.

Dismounting, Flathers proceeded to cut a pile of green brush, which he stacked against a boulder. Then he untied a blanket from behind his saddle cantle.

Taking a flint-and-steel outfit from his pocket, Flathers got a fire started in some dry weeds. Soon he had the green brush burning, and a dense column of thick, greenish-white smoke began lifting up into the cloudless sky.

"Makin' an Injun smoke signal, eh?" Webb commented, seeing at last the purpose of Flathers' work.

Flathers made no reply. Instead, he covered the brush pile with the blanket. Then he whipped the blanket aside, replacing it a few seconds later. The result was a ragged, ball-shaped puff of smoke which soared perpendicularly into the Wyoming sky.

The puff was followed by two more; then a long puff, and following that three more smoke balls.

Monte Webb's spine seemed to freeze within him, as he

translated the signal. As surely as if it had been a Morse code clicking off dots and dashes on the new magnetic telegraph which was beginning to stretch its tentacles out past the Mississippi into the Western wilderness, Webb translated Flathers' message.

"Come immediately to this spot!"

Such would be the meaning of the smoke signal which was rising into the blue, visible to Indian eyes in a wide radius. Any Ogalala Sioux within twenty miles of the pinnacle would believe that one of their scouts had sighted something of vital importance, and would lash their ponies to top speed to reach the source of the smoke signals.

"So you're goin' to turn me over to Red Cloud," Webb said grimly. "Well, I reckon they'll be glad to see me. Their shaman won't forgit how I bashed his noggin for him yesterday evenin', gettin' June Castle out o' their camp. And Red Cloud would prob'ly trade all his hosses an' his favourite squaw to get my hair hangin' on his belt."

He stared down at his captor, but there was no hint of mercy in the other's eyes. Jute Flathers merely repeated his signal with smoking brush and expertly handled blanket.

"You're a perty good guesser fer a man who ain't goin' to keep his ha'r very long," taunted the renegade, throwing loose sand on the fire to extinguish it. "You forgot that Red Cloud ain't just a pizen mean Injun to me, Webb. Red Cloud happens to be my daddy-in-law."

Webb twisted frantically in the saddle. It would do no good to spur his sorrel in an effort at escape; the horse was roped to Flathers' mount. Even if he did make good a dash for freedom, he would be helpless to guide Starface to a point of safety, with his arms tied behind him. He would not even be able to dismount, for his feet were likewise bound.

Flathers squatted down to stoke a corncob pipe with coarse tobacco and kinnikinnick, the red willow bark which the Sioux used in their peace pipes. Seeing the renegade light up his pipe, Webb reflected desparingly that he had seen Flathers smoking at midnight—Flathers' pipe was what had enabled Webb to locate the three conspirators at their gully meeting place.

"My hash is cooked, Flathers, so maybe you'll be decent enough to relieve my curiosity on one point," Webb said

calmly. "There were three of you skunks plottin' to rob Gideon Castle last night. You, and Alabama Jones, and one other—your leader. Who was he?"

Flathers shrugged, smoke spouting from his beak-like nose.

"I ain't sayin'," he answered. "I will say that we aim to get Castle's money bar'l, before that wagon train gits many days farther along the trail. An'——"

Flathers broke off, jumping to his feet to stare off down the slope to the northward.

Webb, twisting in the saddle to stare in the same direction, felt horror shoot through him.

Moving swiftly out of the broken hill country, not a half mile distant, came a long, ragged line of feather-bonneted Sioux.

"Them Injuns was closer'n I figgered," Flathers grunted, rolling up his blanket and tying it behind his cantle. "That's all right with me. It'll take some tall hustlin' for me to get back to the trail ahead o' them wagons, before Sam Benton or Gid Castle get wise that I been ramblin' some place."

Staring with awed fascination, Webb watched the oncoming Sioux as they headed for the pinnacle from whence had come the smoke signals of Jute Flathers.

He would be lucky, he knew, if the Sioux decided to slay him on the spot and bear his scalp back to Red Cloud's village as a trophy of their vengeance. More likely, they would still be smarting under the disgrace of having allowed a white man to outwit their entire village and snatch a woman prisoner from their custody.

Red Cloud would undoubtedly have slower and more agonizing methods of dealing with his prisoner than putting him out of his suffering with a merciful bullet or arrow.

A grin of defiance and resignation twisted Monte Webb's lips as he saw the approaching Ogalala Sioux, after reining up for a brief consultation just out of gun range, head on up the slope.

Sunlight gleamed off deerhide shields and the glittering points of scalp-hung lances and rifle barrels. The Ogalalas were in full warpath regalia, their eagle-feathered bonnets trailing long plumes in the wind.

Hatchetlike faces were smeared with black and ochre paint, in the immemorial symbol of Sioux vengeance. Most

of the braves, twenty or more in number, were outfitted with otterskin quivers laden with arrows, but over half of them also carried American-made rifles—the loot of burned wagon trains, and trappers and buffalo hunters massacred on the open plains.

Jute Flathers lifted an arm in greeting, as the Sioux drew to a halt twenty feet away, their restive ponies forming a semi-circle about the two white men.

Away from the phalanx of riders spurred a massive Indian whose chocolate-brown face was trenched deeply with the lines of his years and the scars of many battles.

Monte Webb felt his blood freeze within him as he recognized the Sioux. He did not need to glance at the red-white-and-brown war bonnet or the many necklaces of bear claws dangling over the Indian's naked chest, to place him as a chief.

For this was Red Cloud, head of the warlike Ogalala tribe, equalled in Sioux annals only by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse and other outstanding leaders of the red men.

Red Cloud's mouth was a drooping gash, his eyes black pinheads of hatred as he raised a flint-headed lance in response to Flathers' greeting.

"How!" rumbled Red Cloud, his burning gaze swivelling to bore into Monte Webb. "You bring Injun a scalp, Man-with-Eyes-Colour-of-Glass?"

Jute Flathers exposed his snaggy teeth in a grin, acknowledging the name by which the Sioux tribesmen knew him.

"You long time angry with me when I take um squaw from your tepee and pay with bad ponies, Red Cloud," Flathers said, his speech a crude jargon of Ogalala phrases and English. "Two sleeps ago, I make friend with Red Cloud by tell um where paleface camp with their tepees on wheels."

Knots of muscles gritted in the corners of Webb's jaws as he heard Flathers' frank confession of his part in the Sioux raid on the Missouri caravan. Sam Benton's judgment had been confirmed.

"Man-with-Eyes-Colour-of-Glass speak truth," Red Cloud intoned. "But paleface soldiers drive away red man, take many scalps. Red man take no scalps; take only white squaw."

Flathers swung out an arm to indicate Monte Webb,

seated motionless in his saddle alongside the squaw man's stirrup.

"Paleface who carry white squaw away from Red Cloud's camp is here!" announced Flathers. "Heap good scalp, no? You take um, Red Cloud. Now I friend with Red Cloud?"

Red Cloud's expression did not change as he nodded gravely. He swept his clenched fist sideways before his face, as a symbol that between him and his unwelcome paleface son-in-law there was no longer enmity, but only goodwill.

Without further parley the triumphant renegade untied the lead rope from his saddlehorn and passed it over to Red Cloud. Then, rearing his black horse in a dramatic gesture of farewell, Flathers curveted the mustang and headed off down the south slope of the pinnacle, heading for the far-off cloud of dust which smudged the south-western horizon.

No one connected with Gideon Castle's wagon train, or even their escorting cavalrymen from Fort Laramie, would dream that Jute Flathers had detoured away from his duties as trail scout. And one look at the half circle of savage faces about him told Monte Webb that he was doomed beyond hope of escape.

"Once more we meet, we who once smoked the pipe of peace in my wigwam!" said Red Cloud, resorting to the Ogalala dialect, which he knew Webb spoke fluently. "It is good to know who took the white squaw from the lodge of Swift Otter, our medicine man."

Of one accord, the Indians spurred forward to circle their lone prisoner. As if by prearrangement, none of them reached for belted scalping knives; no gun or arrowhead was aimed at Webb. Only hostile stares, eyes that held a glint of victory.

Red Cloud grunted an order, flinging up an arm decorated with beadwork bracelets and pendant bear claws.

The rope connected to Starface's bridle jerked taut, and the Sioux headed back to the northward, riding at a swift canter. They were taking Monte Webb back to the Sioux village on the Platte, and to a grisly doom.

Webb knew that, but his senses were too numbered by despair for him to know the emotion of fear. Anger he did know—anger at the treachery of the white man who had purposely led more than four hundred innocent people into

a murder trap. Gideon Castle and the heads of more than ninety Missouri families had placed their trust in a killer far more deadly than any of the Indians who were now escorting Webb to his fate.

Two hours of leisurely but uninterrupted riding, and Red Cloud's warriors reached the banks of Buffalo Creek. There they swung northward, and before the sun had reached the noon position in the sky, they were riding out on to the bottomlands where their tepees were pitched along the bank of the North Platte.

Like conquering heroes, the returning warriors received a loud ovation from the braves and squaws who populated the Sioux encampment. Old women, busy scraping hides, got to their feet with shrill cries of exultation as they spotted the buckskin-clad prisoner being led into camp by their chieftain.

Yells grew to unbridled pandemonium, as the report of Webb's identity went through the camp. This was the white man who had set fire to the brush on the hillside overlooking the village. He was the paleface who had won their admiration—and their hatred—by single-handedly rescuing the white woman who represented the only spoils of their ill-fated attack on the wagon train led by Jute Flathers two nights before.

Straight to the sprawling lodge of Swift Otter, the tribe's holy man, rode Chief Red Cloud. There coppery fingers untied the knots which held Monte Webb captive in the stirrups.

Brutal hands dragged Webb from his saddle. Indian children belaboured him with sticks and rocks until they were shoved aside by brawny warriors.

Jeered by onlooking squaws and elders, the scout was hurled prostrate on the ground. Then two petty chieftains seized him by either ankle, and he was dragged inside the medicine man's tent with his face scraping the dust.

Squatting on a heap of buffalo robes in the centre of the tent, where only the night before June Castle had been held captive, Swift Otter, the witch doctor, regarded the prisoner from behind his horned devil mask. A swift exchange of words followed between Red Cloud and the shaman, words too rapid for Webb to translate.

The medicine man shook a bone rattle and bellowed a mystic incantation, unintelligible even to the warriors who packed the lodge. The words sent the Sioux braves leaping behind a partition of hides, to come forth with ceremonial tom-toms and hollow bone drumsticks.

This was all a prelude to a victory dance, Webb knew. A fanatical orgy would soon begin, that might last far into the night. And the climax of that orgy would be his own death, by some unthinkable torture.

He was not kept long in doubt as to the mode of punishment which Red Cloud intended to mete out upon him. Jerked to his feet, Webb was dragged through the buffalo-hide partition, into a room lighted only by the open smoke hole at the top of the lodge.

A scaffold of peeled fir poles, such as Indians used for drying fish and pemmican, was the only furniture in the room. Below the scaffold was an area covered with the dead ashes of past fires.

Using the lariat rope which Jute Flathers had employed as a hackamore to lead Webb's horse, Red Cloud knotted the rope to the bonds which trussed the scout's wrists behind his back. The other end of the lariat was tossed over the sturdy cross pole of the scaffold.

Then a pair of muscle-slabbed warriors hauled the rope back, to leave Webb's body suspended with his feet three feet above the ground.

Sweat beaded Webb's face, from the excruciating agony of his arms drawing his shoulder blades sharply together. An hour of such hanging, and he knew his reason might snap from sheer torture.

When the rope was knotted fast to a supporting post of the scaffold, the medicine man ushered Red Cloud and the lesser chieftains out of the room.

Almost immediately afterward, a group of young squaws entered the tribal sanctuary, bearing armloads of dry fagots. These were placed, at Swift Otter's direction, in a loose heap directly under the swinging body of Monte Webb.

"They're going to burn me alive—they're——"

Webb choked back the words, refusing doggedly to give any hint of the horror which gripped him.

Outside, tom-toms were beginning to beat in rhythm to

his pounding heart. Savage throats were uplifted in a wild song to the Great Spirit, while a multitude of squaws and children clapped hands in time with the dancers who, by now, were doing a serpentine dance in the open area in front of the shaman's torture lodge.

A moment later the uproar doubled in volume, as the witch doctor strode out of his lodge to direct the ceremonies. And when the Sioux ritual reached its climax, Monte Webb knew the leatheren walls of the lodge would be lifted, so that the Sioux tribe could witness the most horrifying of all American Indian rites—his own torture, by fire——

CHAPTER 7

CHIEF OF THE SIOUX

Outside the medicine man's lodge, the sound of chanting warriors and the *thud-thud-thud* of Sioux tom-toms being pounded with fists and buffalo bones, was rising in an ominous crescendo.

To Monte Webb, the pandemonium of the celebrating Indians was almost muffled by the throb of his own veins in the eardrums. Only by biting his lips until blood seeped down over his jaw could the scout keep from crying out in his agony.

His criss-crossed wrists had been securely tied behind his back by Jute Flathers hours before, and the swelling flesh had cut off circulation from his hands, turning them into blue, throbbing knots of pain even before his arrival in the Sioux village. But now, hanging by a rope connecting his trussed wrists with the torture scaffold overhead, Webb's pain was increased triple-fold.

His hundred-and-eighty-pound bulk was now hanging upon arms that were twisted in an unnatural position behind his spine, pressing his shoulder blades into grotesque positions and causing a tension of sinews and ligaments that was almost unendurable. Yet, tortured though he was, merciful unconsciousness failed to come to Webb's aid.

Sweat poured from his tortured flesh. His feet, suspended three feet above the hard-packed floor of Swift Otter's tent moved slowly back and forth with the slight swaying of his body. And as they did so the soles of the army boots scraped against the heap of tinder-dry faggots which the squaws had borne into the lodge. Those faggots were fuel for the torture fires which would soon roast Monte Webb alive, in keeping with the ferocity for which the Ogalala Sioux were noted.

From time to time more squaws entered the lodge, bearing fresh bundles of brush, dried buffalo chips, and strips of dried willow bark to add to the piles of kindling material.

The stolid-faced Sioux women paid scant attention to the prisoner; they seemed preoccupied in their haste to get back outdoors and witness the serpentine dancing, and the acrobatic antics of their shaman, Swift Otter, whose rattle and drum set the tempo of the dance.

Pencil of sunlight coming in through rawhide-sewn seams of the lodge told Monte Webb that the sun would soon plunge beyond the western horizon. And sundown, he knew, would be the hour of his own doom. When the fiery ball of the sun melted beyond the Wyoming skyline, Swift Otter and the tribal chief, Red Cloud, would superintend the lifting of the lodge's side walls so that the entire tribe could witness the lighting of the ritual fires under the white prisoner.

Webb found himself praying for the sun to hasten its slow crawl down its orb. Death by fire, he knew, was agonizing for the first few seconds; but unconsciousness came swiftly as raw flame and smoke were breathed into the lungs. This time tomorrow, his shock of brown hair would adorn the javelin of Red Cloud, and his body would probably be dragged out into the prairie wastes to attract wolves by night and buzzards by day, until only scoured bones remained—

From this morbid train of thought, Monte Webb was aroused by a soft Indian voice, addressing him in a tense whisper.

He opened his eyes, and as his body swayed slowly on the rope which suspended him from the scaffold, he caught sight of a blanket-shrouded Sioux squaw crawling under the rear of the pegged-down lodge wall.

In the semi-darkness which filled the shaman's holy room, Webb could only dimly make out the single eagle feather which protruded from the squaw's sleek, blue-black hair. The blanket she wore, and the gaudy beaded bandeau about her forehead, were vaguely familiar.

Drawing her body under the pegged bottom of the tent wall, the squaw came forward glancing left and right as if fearful that her presence would be discovered.

And then, as a shaft of westering sunlight fell upon the squaw's scarred and blue-bruised face, Webb gasped with recognition. The squaw was Rainbow-Over-the-Lake, the wife of Jute Flathers!

Webb grinned bitterly as Rainbow-Over-the-Lake paused in

front of him, poking a slim brown hand under the flap of her blanket and drawing out a bowie knife.

"You fooled me last night, Rainbow," Webb muttered, his voice husky with pain. "Your father, Red Cloud, must be very grateful to you for helping get me into this trap—"

Then he broke off, as he saw the Indian woman's mouth twist in a rare smile—the first time since her early girlhood, probably, that this stoic Ogalala woman had smiled.

"I your friend," she whispered. "Last night Rainbow afraid to speak the truth. But you save my life. Now I come to pay you that debt."

New hope leaped in Webb. "What are you doing in your father's village, Rainbow?" he gasped as she pushed her way through the pile of brush and faggots to reach his side. "This is many miles from the paleface wagons. You have come from there, today?"

Rainbow-Over-the-Lake nodded, as she reached to seize the taut rope which suspended Webb over the pile of fuel.

"Last night Jute going to kill his squaw," she whispered. "He going to kill me because I no tell him where his fire water was hidden. So I ran away. I come to live in the village of my own people. No longer will I live with Jute. Him bad white man."

The keen-whetted knife slashed through the rope, and an instant later Monte Webb's body dropped into the cushioning pile of firewood. He fell forward on his face, gasping with relief as his tortured arms and back muscles were relieved of his weight.

Then he felt the Indian girl sawing her knife through the rawhide saddle strings which her husband had knotted about his wrists. A moment later he was free, blood tingling back into his numb, purpled hands. Rainbow-Over-the-Lake helped him to his feet, and he lurched his way out of the knee-deep pile of brush.

For a moment Webb stood there, swaying unsteadily, rubbing his throbbing hands to rid them of their feeling of dead, useless weight on the ends of his arms.

"Red Cloud would kill you if he knew this, Rainbow!" he whispered. "You know that, don't you?"

The Indian girl nodded.

"And yet you'd risk your life—to get me out of here—"

Rainbow-Over-the-Lake shrugged. "There is no time to waste," she replied, in the Ogalala dialect. "Your horse is tied in the trees above the village. Your long rifle that speaks like the thunder is with the horse. I put them there before I came to Swift Otter's lodge."

Emotion choked Monte Webb, gratitude for the courage that had caused the Sioux chieftain's daughter to risk death or, at the least, expulsion from her tribe, should her rescue of a prisoner become known.

"My father will not know," the Indian girl whispered, tugging at the buckskin fringe on the scout's sleeve as she led him toward the back wall of the tent. "If you see Jute, you tell him I am happy, back among my people. I will not feel his whip or his heavy hand again."

Getting down on hands and knees at the spot where Rainbow-Over-the-Lake had crawled into the shaman's lodge, Webb looked up, his eyes narrow slits.

"By now, Jute Flathers is at Fort Laramie," he said. "When I see him, I will take your message to him, Rainbow. And—you need not worry that Jute will return to get you. You need never worry about Jute again."

The squaw nodded. No further words were needed between them. She knew that when Monte Webb and her cruel renegade husband met, that guns would blaze between them. And she had little doubt, and even less sorrow, about the outcome of that meeting.

Webb reached down and lifted the flap of the deer-hide wall. He turned, intending to voice his thanks for the last time to the red-skinned girl who had saved him. But Rainbow-Over-the-Lake was gone, slipping into the outer room of the shaman's lodge, her errand of mercy finished.

Lying prone, Monte Webb wriggled his way out into the blue twilight and stood up.

No Indians were on this side of the lodge, Webb was sure; the entire tribe would be out in the open area in front of Swift Otter's holy lodge, watching the consummation of the victory dance which was to have ended in their prisoner's death. Then, even as he got to his feet, Webb heard a sharp gasp behind him. He glanced around—and stiffened with horror.

Rounding the rear corner of the shaman's lodge came Red

Cloud, resplendent in his huge feathered head-dress, his body smeared with ceremonial paint.

For a dozen heartbeats the Indian and the paleface scout stared at each other, both men speechless with surprise.

Then Webb hunched his shoulders and charged forward with clenched fists, as he saw Red Cloud open his mouth to vent a bellow of warning. But the yell went unheard in the sinister din of the warriors who were dancing to the music of chanting voices and pounding war drums.

Sunset glow flashed on the blade of Red Cloud's tomahawk, as he jerked the weapon from his scalp-hung belt, poised it murderously as Webb charged him.

With berserk strength, the scout seized the tomahawk handle with both hands, even as Red Cloud aimed a chopping blow at his skull. Both men crashed earthward, as Red Cloud was bowled over by the ferocity of Webb's rush. The wind grunted from the big chief's lungs, as he felt the white man's throttling hand sink into his throat.

A savage wrench, and the tomahawk was jerked from the Indian's grasp. A moment later the two men rolled free of each other and leaped to their feet. Red Cloud snatching a long-bladed knife from his belt,

Weakened from his ordeal, his brain spinning, Webb knew he was no match for the infuriated Indian. Staking all on one terrific onslaught, he hurled Red Cloud's tomahawk with all his force at the livid-faced Sioux.

There sounded a grisly chopping sound, as the tomahawk, with which Red Cloud had murdered an untold number of white men, sank inches deep into the chief's chest.

Blood squirted in a crimson flood, and the mighty Sioux chieftain flopped on his face before Monte Webb. Death had come to Red Cloud——

Only for an instant did Webb pause, staring down at the slain Indian. Then he turned, to race off through the surrounding wigwams in the direction of the balsam fir forest on the crest of the ridge, where Rainbow-Over-the-Lake had picketed his sorrel mustang.

* * *

Sunset found Gideon Castle's huge wagon train camping in the long shadow of the log block-house and mud-mortared

stockade of Fort Laramie, its whitewash reflecting the sunset hues.

The caravaners' hearts thrilled as they heard the blood-stirring notes of a bugle, which accompanies the lowering of the Stars and Stripes from the lofty pole atop one of the Laramie bastions. They had reached another of the infrequent milestones stretched between Missouri and the western sea; and this was the last American habitation of any size they would see before they reached the backbone of the continent—the Rocky Mountains.

Jute Flathers, their bewhiskered trail guide, had reached the fort a few miles in advance of the lumbering wagons. As yet, the guide had not discovered that his Indian wife had slipped away from the train earlier that day.

A general atmosphere of happiness and release of tension made itself manifest among the emigrants. Here at Fort Laramie was a haven of security where no night watch was necessary. Here Grote Kettleman, the official blacksmith of the caravan, could repair trail-worn wagons. Here the sore hoofs of mules and oxen could be treated with tallow and gunpowder, in preparation for more gruelling miles of travel. Here depleted stocks of flour, sugar and bacon could be replenished.

Sam Benton, his face gaunt with worry, made his way immediately after reporting to the commandant to the living quarters shared by the scouts employed by the garrison. Here he received the disturbing news that Monte Webb had not yet returned to the fort.

Benton hurried back to the wagon train, his face grim.

"Webb ain't here yet, and that's bad, Castle," he told the wagon-train captain. He had met Castle outside the stockade, where the Missourian was superintending the herding of the livestock on to nearby pasturage. "Webb stayed behind to check up on those killers he heard plottin' last night. He should've overtaken the train before now."

Castle fingered his beard thoughtfully. Then he raised his voice to address Jute Flathers, who had begun his fruitless search of the throng in an effort to determine why his squaw wife had not pitched their tent for the night.

"Jute—you see anything of Monte Webb durin' the day?"

Stoking his corncob with coarse tobacco, Flathers made

his way toward Benton and the wagon-train captain. The twilight masked the crafty gleam which had kindled in the guide's eyes.

"Nary hide nor hair o' Webb," he answered. "I thought he was with the cavalrymen."

Benton eyed Flathers narrowly. In spite of what Webb had said concerning the squaw man, the night before, Benton felt an odd sense of suspicion, a feeling that Flathers was gloating over some secret triumph.

"If Webb don't show up tonight, I'm ridin' back to that last trail camp for a look-see," Benton stated. "I know Webb is capable o' takin' care of hisself, but there's a chance he might've run afoul of some rovin' band o' Sioux."

Two hours after sundown the commander of the army post presided over a dinner which was attended, according to custom, by the leaders of the Missouri wagon train camped outside the stockade walls.

At the head of the table, in a place of honour to the commandant's right, Gideon Castle and his wife were seated. June, looking cool and fresh in a voluminous-skirted white frock, had been placed between her mother and Ross Flagg, the latter bedecked in his full regimentals, as befitted the occasion.

To the commandant's left sat Jute Flathers, a place always given to the trail guide in charge of passing caravans. Sam Benton and Major Scott, second in command at Fort Laramie and leader of the cavalrymen who had saved the Missourians from annihilation, sat next in line to Flathers.

It was a gala occasion, the first time the Missourians had had their feet under a real table since leaving Fort Kearney more than a month before.

Trail gossip, and glowing accounts of the beauty of the Rocky Mountains and scenery to be encountered along the Columbia River, made the diners linger in the mess hall long after the army-kitchen corps had cleared off the tables.

The emigrants, in their turn, brought news from Missouri, and St. Louis newspapers which told of Lee's surrender at Appomattox. This angle of the conversation was monopolized by Captain Flagg, who had been attached to General Grant's staff in the closing months of the war between the States.

"You folks can be proud of your rôle as empire builders

for this mighty nation," said the commandant, with the flamboyant oratory he always assumed in making the self-same speech to the leaders of wagon caravans who passed his outpost on their way along the Oregon Trail. "Not until this continent was spanned by wagon wheels did America have any real opportunity to expand its boundaries. 'Wagon wheels West' can well be the watchword of America, now that peace once more dwells in the land. And the men responsible for guiding you restless settlers toward the sunset are men of a valiant breed—the overland trade guides, such as Mr. Flathers, seated at my left. Ladies and gentlemen, I propose a toast—to your intrepid scout and guide, Jute Flathers!"

The diners arose, lifting their wine glasses toward the stubbly jowled squaw man. Among them, only Gideon Castle and Sam Benton drank the toast with no apparent relish.

"I'm thankin' ye, folks," grinned Flathers, lifting his own glass in talonlike fingers. "I——"

He broke off, his face going chalky white under the ceiling lamps as he stared across the dining hall toward the door. Stark horror was stamped on his features, and the wine glass dropped with a chipping crash to the table.

"*Monte . . . Webb!*" Flathers squawked out the name as if it were a fish bone he was extracting from his throat.

June Castle was the first to overcome her astonishment at Flathers' strange actions. She swung her gaze to the doorway, and her eyes lighted as she saw, framed there, the tall figure of the army scout.

Webb's face, granite-hard in the lamplight, was grey with trail dust and etched with dark lines of weariness. His eyes were locked on the cringing figure of Jute Flathers, at the head of the table.

"It's Webb!" cried Major Scott, mistaking Webb's steely expression for one of fatigue. "We're sorry you arrived too late for the celebration, Webb! News of your daring feat has already been reported to the commandant——"

A hoarse gasp that was almost a scream, coming from Jute Flathers, made Scott break off. He turned, frowning puzzledly as he saw the guide drop a trembling hand to the butt of the Colt .45 holstered at his hip.

"What's wrong with you, Flathers?" demanded Scott. "You know Webb, don't you? You're staring as if you thought you were looking at a ghost!"

A brittle laugh came from Monte Webb, as the scout strode into the room: "He *does* think he sees a ghost!"

There was a .44 Dragoon six-gun in Webb's holster, now —a gun he had obtained at his sleeping quarters, the moment of his arrival at the stockade ten minutes ago. Jute Flathers noted that fact, and remembered the gun he had taken from Webb's holster earlier that day.

The squaw man glanced frantically to right and left. Then, kicking back his chair, he leaped desperately toward a nearby window, overlooking the compound inside the stockade walls.

"Stop where you are, Flathers!" Webb's voice cracked like a whiplash in the dining hall, and the guide halted, as if he had lost the power of motion.

"Friends," said Webb, glancing at the assembled diners who still remained, transfixed, at the table, "I hate to bust up the festivities this way. But it's my sad duty to report that you have been pinning your trust, ever since your wagons left Independence, on a skunk and a traitor. Jute Flathers will be placed under arrest tonight. He won't be taking you to Oregon."

A moment's stunned silence greeted the scout's words.

Ross Flagg slid a protecting arm about June Castle's waist, as he saw Jute Flathers suddenly snap erect, a hairy fist dropping to the butt of the Colt .45 holstered at his hip.

"You—you're a liar, Webb!" cried the renegade, his voice hoarse with terror. "You ain't arrestin' me——"

Major Scott rose and strode toward the two men, eyes snapping from one to the other.

"What is this, Webb?" he demanded. "What are you saying about Flathers?"

Monte Webb's drawl held deadly menace.

"Jute Flathers sold out Castle's wagons to Chief Red Cloud two days back. This mornin' Flathers turned me over to the Indians. He——"

Before Sam Benton, who was nearest, could leap to block Flathers' move, the squaw man's arm leaped upward and a six-gun thundered deafeningly in the room.

Even as Flathers' wildly aimed slug tore slivers from the

puncheon floor between his widespread feet, Monte Webb's hand plummeted to the butt of his gun. Then lamps overhead swayed, the scout's heavy Dragoon bucked and roared in his grasp.

Jute Flathers' crouched body twitched under the shock of drilling bullets, as he struggled to raise his own gun for another shot. Then, dead on his feet, the double-crossing scout toppled sideways against Sam Benton, who let the body thud floorward. A spreading pool of crimson crawled out over the boards, and the eyes of every person in the room seemed glued to the prostrate figure.

It was Ross Flagg who finally broke the silence.

Releasing his arm from June Castle's waist, the ex-army captain stepped forward, jerking his arm in stiff salute before the commandant of Fort Laramie. Then his arm swung about, to point an accusing finger toward Monte Webb.

"I demand the arrest and court-martalling of Mr. Webb, sir!" he cried in a voice of repressed fury. "I was one of the men who hired Jute Flathers, back in Independence. I condemn Webb's shooting now as wanton, cold-blooded murder. He goaded Flathers into gunplay."

Webb smiled bleakly as he snapped to attention before the commandant, and for a moment his eyes regarded June Castle through the bobbing layers of gunsmoke which hung milkily in the air.

"You may be assured, Captain Flagg, that this shooting will be fully investigated!" the commandant said brusquely. "Mr. Webb, I place you under arrest. You will be held in custody pending a formal court martial at noon tomorrow!"

CHAPTER 8

ON TO OREGON !

Late the following afternoon, Ross Flagg headed out of the front gate of the Fort Laramie stockade and walked toward the nearby bank of Laramie River, where several score housewives were busy scrubbing clothes on the smooth rocks, revelling in the luxury of soft water and quantities of fresh laundry soap which they had obtained from the forts trading post.

Sabre clanking in scabbard, Flagg made his way through mounds of clothing until he came to where Mrs. Castle and her daughter were busy scrubbing clothes and bedding in the sluicing, icy waters of the stream.

June Castle looked up, her eyes filled with concern as she saw her blue-uniformed fiance pause on the grassy bank, nervously plucking at the hilt of his cavalry sabre.

" You have just come from the court-martial, haven't you, Ross? " she asked anxiously. " What did they do to Monte Webb? "

Flagg bit his lip, his face dark with anger.

" Oh, Webb was acquitted unanimously! " he replied bitterly. " Apparently the cold-blooded murder of Jute Flathers was just a minor incident, out here in the wild West."

" But Ross! " protested Mrs. Castle, pulling a wisp of iron-grey hair away from her face, " Mr. Webb said that Flathers turned him over to the Indians to be tortured yesterday—and that Flathers confessed he arranged that Indian attack on all of us the other night——"

Flagg's blade-thin lips curled in a sneer.

" They had only Webb's word for that. Webb had known Flathers for several years. I have no doubt but that he shot him in settlement for some private grudge."

June Castle stood up, flicking soapsuds from her slim hands.

" I, for one, " she flared, " am perfectly willing to accept Monte Webb's word for anything to do with Flathers' guilt. After all, Flathers was a—a contemptible squaw man. Dad

didn't trust him. He told me that, just before the Indian raid. Jute——”

“ You've taken considerable shine to Webb, haven't you, June? ” Flagg interrupted angrily. “ Just because that uncouth yokel saved you from the Indians the other night is no reason why you should defend his cold-blooded slaughter of the man we were depending upon to guide us to Oregon.”

Footsteps behind Flagg caused June to withhold the retort that had sprung to her lips. Squinting through the sunlight, she saw that her father and Sam Benton had just walked up to the river bank.

“ We just got back from Flathers' burial,” Castle said. “ The fact that Flathers' wife was not here is evidence to prove what Webb said about the Indian woman rescuing him from Red Cloud's village.”

“ But the fact remains,” Flagg said brusquely, “ that Webb has deprived us of a guide. And guides are not easily found, out here five hundred miles from nowhere.”

Gideon Castle sunk chin to chest, nodding gravely.

“ We can go on without a guide, I reckon,” he said at last. “ After all, wagons have been movin' along the Oregon Trail since Lewis an' Clark an' the Hudson's Bay trappers opened up this route. Reckon we can foller their tracks an' make it.

Benton shook his head.

“ Trekkin' to Oregon ain't that easy,” he said warningly. “ Bein' a trail scout calls for a man who knows the country like a book. Winds an' storms wipe out wagon tracks, an' conditions keep changin'. You got to get yourself a new guide.

“ For instance,” Benton continued, “ your guide's got to know how to get over a mountain range by the easiest grade. He's got to know how an' where to ford rivers—an' you've got plenty o' river crossin's to make. You got to have fuel for fires, an' grass an' water for your livestock every thirty miles or so. Your guide's got to know where the dangerous Injun country is, an' a thousand other details you Missourians don't take into account.”

“ Just the same, we have Monte Webb to thank for this mess,” snapped Flagg. “ Personally, I don't think Flathers double-crossed us, as Webb claimed at the court-martial. I think——”

June Castle hurried away from the scene, unwilling to listen

further to Flagg's diatribes. His hostile attitude toward Webb, and his avowed friendship for the dead Jute Flathers, were both unexplainable to the girl.

She made her way in the direction of the whitewashed stockade of Fort Laramie, intending to visit the trading post there. In the act of entering the garrison enclosure, she found herself facing Monte Webb.

"Well, Miss Castle, I'm out of jail," grinned the scout. "I—I want to apologize for what you had to witness last night."

They sat down on a bench near the stockade, eyes held to each other as if by a strange, compelling attraction.

"You were justified in what you did, Monte," June said earnestly. "I worried all night—about your court-martial. I'm so glad I know all is right with you, before our train leaves Fort Laramie."

Webb looked away, eyes focusing on the distant hills.

"I hope—Miss Castle—that you'll send word back here, soon as you get settled out in Oregon. It's God's country. It'll be worth all the hardships you'll have to go through to reach it."

He looked at her again, thrilling to the bloom of her womanhood, the vitality and grace of her bearing.

"You—you'll be gettin' married when you get to Oregon?" he asked awkwardly.

June Castle lowered her eyes, running her finger-tips along the rough bench between them.

"Yes," she said finally, "Captain Flagg and I—we grew up together back in Hannibal, Missouri. Before Ross went away to join the Yankee troops—well, everyone took it for granted we'd marry some day, I guess. Then when we decided to go to Oregon, he left the army to come along."

"He's a lucky man."

She looked up, and for a moment their glances met, held.

Before either could speak, they heard voices behind them and turned to see a sizable group of men approaching. June recognized her father in the lead, and the men following him were the elders of the wagon train, the council which planned all policies connected with the train. With them were Ross Flagg and Sam Benton.

"Mr. Webb," said Castle, clearing his throat, "me an'

our council jest met. We aim to pull out for South Pass tomorrow, an' we're in need of a competent trail guide."

Webb stood up, waiting for Castle to go on.

"Well . . . we been talkin' to your commandant at the fort here," Castle blurted, "an' he says it's all right with him if you—well, dang it, Webb, we're offerin' you a job at twice your army pay, to guide our train out to the Willamette Valley in Oregon!"

Someone gripped Webb's hand, and he glanced down to see June Castle looking up at him, her eyes glowing with excitement.

"Oh, please say you'll take the job, Monte!" the girl said impulsively. "We need you so badly."

Webb swallowed hard, conscious of a strange feeling of excitement. His glance found Sam Benton's.

"Well, it's a bit out of my line, gentlemen," Webb said reluctantly. "I'm right honoured by this trust you're placin' in me, but I——"

Benton laughed, his gaze switching significantly from the scout to the chestnut-haired girl at his side.

"Schucks, Webb!" Benton chuckled. "You said yourself the Oregon country was the best place you'd ever seen. You know every inch o' the trail from here to the fur post at Astoria. You better take up this job while you got the chance, son."

Webb's eyes swept the sober faces of the men before him, noting the plea in each of their gazes.

These men, heads of homes, fathers of families, had implicit faith in his ability to guide them through the dangers that lay ahead. Prairies infested with warlike Indian tribes, rugged mountain passes, quicksand-bedded rivers and long stretches arid desert.

"Gentlemen, I accept!" said Webb, squaring his shoulders purposefully and glancing down to meet June Castle's shining eyes. "I'll take over the reins tomorrow mornin'!"

"As the commandant puts it," laughed Sam Benton "tomorrow it's wagon wheels west an' on to Oregon! But we'll sure miss you, Monte Webb."

The councilmen crowded forward to shake their new leader's hand. In every face save one, Webb saw relief and joy at his decision to guide them toward the western ocean.

But in the face of Ross Flagg, Webb saw only hatred and rebellion, and he knew that open enmity would flare between them some time during the weeks to follow.

And such an event would be particularly bitter to contemplate. For Ross Flagg was the man who would take June Castle for his bride, as soon as Webb had guided them to trail's end—

For ten days out of Fort Laramie, the crawling wagons of Gideon Castle's caravan followed the south bank of the Platte, before coming to the point where the river had to be crossed.

Here, as at no time during the trek across the Wyoming plains, did the emigrants come to appreciate the frontier savvy possessed by their new trail scout, Monte Webb.

Gone was the confusion and dread which had seized the westward-bound pioneers on past river crossings under Jute Flathers' supervision—the Big Blue, the South Platte near Julesburg, and the Laramie River.

With the crisp efficiency of a field general snapping commands on a battlefield, Webb went about his work.

Cottonwood logs were chopped from the river bank trees, and lashed to the wagons. Thus buoyed up by the logs, wagon after wagon was successfully floated across the deepest part of the river to the accompaniment of cracking whips and shouting men.

The sizable herd of cattle and spare oxen—two yokes for each of the ninety-two wagons in the train—were swum across the Platte under the direction of Webb and the head drover, Grote Kettleman.

"We only got one more bad river crossin' to make, folks," Webb announced at the camp fire meeting of the throng when camp was made that night. "That's the Snake, after we leave Fort Boise. But you won't be mindin' that crossin' so much, no matter how much quicksand we hit or how swift the current is. Because when we get to the other side of the Snake, our wagon wheels will be runnin' through Oregon ruts!"

During the days that followed, as the caravan moved by twenty-mile "hops" along the north bank of the Platte, Monte Webb had time for little personal contact with the members of the Missouri train. His duties kept him in the saddle from sunrise to sunset.

The wagon train was in hostile Indian country now, but aside from an occasional Shoshone or Kiowa smoke signal on some distant peak, Webb saw little reason to fear an Indian attack. The size of the caravan was in itself enough to frighten off the average band of warriors. Moreover, because most of the wagons were drawn by oxen, there was less temptation for the savages to make raids on the livestock, as would have been the case had the emigrants carried a remuda of mules or saddle horses.

At length, two weeks after they had left Fort Laramie, they saw the sprawling, fifty-acre granite formation known as Independence Rock looming before them, and the following night they were parking their wagons and bedding down their cattle and oxen under the granite walls of the landmark.

Several plainsmen, Mormons from the Salt Lake country to the south-west, were camped at the Rock, and made offers to the Missourians to carve their names on the landmark for whisky and tobacco money.

There were many other distinguished names painted or chiselled on Independence Rock—names famous in American frontier history: Captain Bonneville, Fontanelle, the famous trail blazers, the Sublette brothers, John Fremont, Kit Carson and Jim Bridger.

“Folks, you’ll all be glad to know that you’ve safely reached the half-way point in your trek to Oregon,” Monte Webb announced, as the long shadows of dusk fell across their camp ground and the westering sun rays lit up the rising columns of supper fires. “Plenty of wagon trains before us never got this far west, so we have cause to give thanks tonight.”

When the evening meal was over and guards had been picketed at various points around the camp, as the usual watch against possible Indian attack, Webb sought out Gideon Castle. The old wagoneer was busy packing the wheel hubs of his wagon with grease from the bucket slung under the rear axle.

“Castle, so far there ain’t been any attempt to get hold of that keg of gold you’re carryin’,” the scout began gravely. “But the fact still remains, that even with Alabama Jones and Jute Flathers dead, the leader of those would-be robbers is still among us.”

Castle nodded soberly.

"I've done plenty o' thinkin' about that," he said. "That's why I let it be known, publicly, that the gold keg is no longer bein' kept in my freight wagon. Nobody outside o' the council knows whar it is bein' kept—an' all of them are trusted men."

Monte Webb grinned.

"I know where that gold is hid," he reminded the wagon captain. "Not that it's particularly any o' my business. But I'd advise you, Castle, to split up that money. It don't strike me as very wise business, keepin' all o' your eggs in one basket that way."

Castle stood up, his face seamed with thoughtful lines in the eerie witch glow of the full moon which had lifted above the curved shoulder of Independence Rock.

"I see your p'int, Webb," he answered. "We might as well attend to that now. We'll get the gold, hold a public assembly, an' distribute the gold accordin' to the signed receipts each family holds."

Castle linked his arm through the scout's, as they headed off along the outside of the circle of wagons.

"Zeke Prichett was gettin' nervous about havin' that gold in his wagon full o' bar'l's, anyway," the Missourian commented. "I reckon this system o' lettin' everybody be responsible fer his own share o' money is the best way. Danged if I don't know what we'd do without you, Monte; you're more level-headed than lots o' men twice your age!"

A few minutes later they had reached the wagon marked:

MISSISSIPPI COOPERAGE CO.,

HANNIBAL, MO.

EZEKIAL PRICHETT, PROP.

"Zeke believes in advertisin' all the way out," Webb laughed.

Next to the wagon, in a small canvas tent waterproofed with gutta percha, Zeke Prichett was in the habit of sleeping, his barrel-loaded wagon being too full to accommodate his bedroll.

"Zeke!" called Castle, approaching the closed flies of Prichett's tent. "Come on out. We got business to talk—"

In the act of poking his head into Prichett's tent, Castle

jerked back so violently that he bumped into Webb, standing at his back. The scout saw that the old wagon boss was white with horror, his face suddenly beaded with sweat.

"Gid, what's wrong with you?"

Castle pointed a shaking finger into the tent.

"Prichett—he's been murdered!"

Jerking the tent flies apart, Monte Webb stared into the tent, which was lighted by the yellowish rays of a smoky oil lantern suspended from the tent pole overhead.

Sprawled on the disordered blankets on the ground, which filled the greater part of the floor of the tent, lay the twisted body of a goat-whiskered Missourian whom Monte Webb recognized as Zeke Prichett.

utting from Prichett's scrawny chest was the hilt of a bowie knife, and blood was seeping through the fabric of the man's woollen shirt, from the eight inches of steel which pierced his lung.

Webb's face was grim with horror as he saw Prichett's eyelids flutter, his face grey with approaching death.

"Prichett—who done this?" cried the scout, leaping to the dying man's side with Gideon Castle at his heels. "Speak, Prichett—who stabbed you?"

His bald head cradled in Webb's lap, Zeke Prichett struggled to speak, crimson bubbles swelling and bursting on his lips.

"Grote . . . Kettleman . . . come in with a poke of gold dust . . . just after I'd pitched camp . . . tonight," the dying man gasped, blood making a gurgling sound in his windpipe.

"Said . . . he wanted . . . to put it with the other gold . . . for safe keepin' . . . till we got to . . . Oregon——"

Webb and Castle exchanged horrified glances over the man's head.

"Kettleman . . . helped me carry the keg o' gold . . . into the tent," Prichett went on, his voice trailing off into a pain-racked whisper. "Then . . . afore I could open the cask . . . Kettleman stuck me . . . figgered he'd killed me an' lit out . . . with the gold. Reckon I was foolish, Gid . . . but I——"

Zeke Prichett's head fell back, and death glazed his eyes.

CHAPTER 9

OUT OF THE QUICKSAND

Monte Webb turned to Gideon Castle, his face a granite mask in the lamp shine.

" You stay here an' make sure nobody finds out about Zeke's murder. It'd cause a panic! " he ordered, shoving past Castle. " Grote Kettleman doesn't know Prichett lived to name his killer. I'll rattle my hocks over to Kettleman's tent, and I'm betting my last chip I catch him with the gold—"

Before Castle could protest, Webb had left the tent and was running across the big enclosure of wagons, heading toward the blacksmith shop on wheels which Grote Kettleman owned.

Kettleman's wagon was always located opposite the supper fires. The wagons nearest the blacksmith's were unoccupied at night, for they were largely freight wagons loaded with furniture and supplies belonging to emigrants who owned more than one wagon.

Webb's hand coiled about the walnut stock of his .44 as he neared Kettleman's wagon. A lantern sat on the driver's seat, its yellowish glare falling on the outer side of the wagon.

A moment later Webb was climbing over the ox chains which linked the tail gate of Kettleman's wagon to the tongue and single trees of the Conestoga immediately behind it. Then Webb halted, heart pounding his ribs.

Grote Kettleman was busy saddling a coal-black mustang, a few feet from his wagon. Alongside the blacksmith was a small brass-hooped, oaken-staved keg—the keg which Kettleman had knifed a man to obtain!

" Get your hands up, Kettleman! "

The blacksmith whirled at Webb's steely-voiced order. One ham-sized fist dropped to a holstered revolver at his belt, but Kettleman checked his draw as he found himself staring into the bore of Webb's .44 Colt.

" What the devil! " cried Kettleman, his two-hundred-and-eighty-pound frame stiffening as Webb approached.

"What's rowellin' you, Webb? Put that hog-leg away 'fore you hurt somebody!"

Webb halted, his shadow falling across the treasure keg.

"Saddlin' up your cayuse to go somewhere, Kettleman?" he inquired.

"What's it to you?" Kettleman's voice was sullen, wary.

"I'm in charge of this wagon train," Webb went on. "Anyone riding away from the wagons must report to me first. But let's cut out the bluffing, Kettleman. What's in this keg?"

Kettleman dropped into a crouch, reminding Webb of a grizzly bear at bay. Murderous lights flashed in the blacksmith's deep-socketed eyes, and muscles corded on his thick, bullish neck.

"It's a keg o'-o' horseshoes," he retorted, a hint of desperation in his voice. "Several critters need shoein' before they go lame."

Monte Webb's gun hammer clicked, and Kettleman released his grip on the revolver handle to elevate his arms.

"That keg wouldn't be full of gold dust and money, would it?" Webb was stalling for time, hoping to get close enough to seize Kettleman's gun before the blacksmith decided to fight it out.

"I don't savvy what you're drivin' at, Webb."

Webb paused, arm's length from the killer. "I'll tell you what I'm drivin' at, Kettleman," he said. "I'm arresting you and bringing you before a kangaroo court for the murder of Zeke Prichett to-night. Before Prichett died he—"

With a berserk roar, Grote Kettleman threw aside all attempt at bluffing. Vaulting the keg at his feet, the blacksmith hurled himself squarely at the gun in the scout's hand. But even as Kettleman's gorilla-like arm shot outward at the scout's six-gun, Webb pulled trigger.

The roar of the .44 covered the sound of a slab punching into Kettleman's muscle-slabbed torso at point-blank range. Spun like a top by the impact of the bullet, Kettleman collapsed at Webb's feet.

"Hated to shoot a man who didn't have a gun in his own hand," muttered Webb. "But as it is, I reckon I saved the council from tryin' you an' stringin' you up to the nearest tree—"

Thrusting his six-gun into holster, the scout knelt down, intending to roll Kettleman over on his side. A split second later he was to regret having jumped to the conclusion that this bullet had ended the big smithy's life.

Kettleman shot up a hairy, iron-muscled arm, cranking Webb's head and neck into the crushing bend of his elbow.

Even as he felt consciousness leaving him, Webb was aware of the wounded blacksmith rearing to his feet. The pressure of his head lock seemed to be splitting Webb's skull from temple to temple.

Footsteps came running from out of the night, and Grote Kettleman flung Webb to arm's length, cocking a fist for a killing uppercut. Blindly trying to duck, the scout caught the blow glancing across the point of his jaw. Slammed backward by the impact of rock-hard knuckles, Webb's head struck the hub of the wagon's hind wheel, and he slid limply to the ground.

With a hoarse grunt, Grote Kettleman lifted the tiny, gold-filled keg as if it were empty. Boosting it to his shoulder, the blacksmith unhooked stirrups from saddlehorn and mounted his black mustang. Then, ripping the horse's flanks with steel, Kettleman headed off on to the open prairie to the north, in the opposite direction of Independence Rock and the wagons.

A moment later Monte Webb was blinking himself back to his senses to find Gideon Castle dousing the contents of Grote Kettleman's water pail over his bleeding scalp.

"Monte!" cried the old wagoneer. "What happened to you? Was that Kettleman I seen dashin' off on hoss-back just now?"

As he helped the stunned scout to his feet, Castle saw Webb nod groggily.

"It was Kettleman, all right," Webb groaned. "And he's totin' your treasure bar'l with him, Castle."

Webb gripped the older man's shoulders, hanging on to Castle for support while he cleared his head.

"Listen, Gid—go and saddle up Starface for me," he said. "I can overtake Kettleman on Starface before many miles. Hurry, pardner——"

"But you're hurt, son——"

"Get my horse!" demanded Webb. "I'm all right to ride after that skunk. You want to lose that gold?"

Scowling dubiously, Gideon Castle hurried away to duck between two wagons, heading from the bedded-down live-stock. Webb, rubbing his bruised and blood-sticky scalp, clung to a wheel of Kettleman's wagon for support.

After what seemed an eternity, the wagon captain returned, leading Webb's sorrel gelding, bridled and saddled.

"That skunk's got too much head start on ye, son!" protested Castle, as Webb grabbed the reins and swung into stirrup. "He's liable to hole up in some clump o' bresh an' ambush you, if you get too close!"

Webb, loosening the Spencer rifle in the saddleboot under his right knee, laughed harshly.

"Kettleman's bronc will tire out fast, with a man his size a-straddle of him," Webb yelled back, as he rowelled Starface into a gallop. "Besides, that keg he's carryin' is mighty heavy. He won't get far—"

Spurring the sorrel to a dead run, the scout headed off across the moonlit prairie, in the direction in which he had seen Grote Kettleman vanish into the night.

Puzzled thoughts swarmed through Webb's brain, as he bent low over the pommel, wind whipping at the brim of his plains hat, tugging at the chin cord about his throat.

How had Kettleman known that Zeke Prichett was hiding the treasure cask? According to Gideon Castle, only the picked members of the caravan's board of elders—trustworthy old men, all of them—had known the hiding place of the gold-filled keg.

Kettleman had not been one of the mysterious trio whom Webb had heard plotting to murder Castle to obtain possession of the treasure keg; Webb was still positive of that. Kettleman's gigantic figure would have been easy to identify, even in the thick of the struggle he had had with the conspirators.

Still, by some method, the blacksmith had learned of the man who had the gold in custody, and by a simple ruse had tricked Zeke Prichett into revealing which of the barrels and kegs on his wagon was the one containing the caravan's gold.

The brilliant moonlight etched the prairie brush clumps and rocks into sharp relief, and before Webb had travelled a mile from the camp at Independence Rock, he came across the trail of Kettleman's horse.

The fleeing blacksmith was veering eastward, toward the black line which traced the course of Elkhorn Creek, a tributary of the Platte which emptied into the larger river at a point just east of Independence Rock.

Remembering Castle's warning that Kettleman, if overtaken, might hole up in ambush and attempt to shoot any pursuing horse and rider, Monte Webb rode with grim vigilance as he followed Kettleman's trail nearer and nearer to the Elkhorn's low-walled canyon. Swinging wide to the south, the scout reined up as he reached the brink of the Elkhorn.

Then, even as his eyes scanned the stretch of moonlit river bottom, Webb caught sight of his quarry.

Less than fifty yards away, out in the middle of the yellow-silted creek, Webb caught sight of Grote Kettleman.

The blacksmith was wading waist-deep across the stream, and his pinto mustang was wallowing in belly-deep mud at the edge of the Elkhorn.

One glimpse at the wildly thrashing horse, and Monte Webb knew that the animal's fate was sealed. Any frontiersman knew that the Elkhorn was a death trap to the unwary—a stream whose bed was a mire of quicksand, in which many an Indian, and untold thousands of buffalo, had been dragged to their doom in years past.

Even as Webb spurred down the low cut bank toward the water, he saw Kettleman halt, with yellow water swirling about his armpits.

Through the moonlight, Kettleman resembled a deformed hunchback, from the oaken keg which he balanced on one shoulder.

Riding along the river bank, keeping well away from the ugly black quicksand which even his horse seemed to know would bring peril to them, Webb saw Kettleman flounder desperately as his legs sank knee-deep in the treacherous sandy bottom of the river, his heavy body breaking through the crust of the mire.

With a bellow of fear, Kettleman flung the heavy treasure cask away from him, seeking thus to lighten his weight and give him an opportunity to extricate himself from the deadly quicksand which was dragging him down.

Monte Webb groaned as he saw the keg vanish under the water with a yellow splash. The gold of the Missouri-bound

caravan was lost beyond hope of recovery now, the scout knew; for the gold-laden cask would roll only a few feet with the current, before its weight would cause it to sink in the quagmire below. Once underground, the heavy keg would sink till it reached bed-rock, forever beyond hope of recovery.

Webb dismounted, unbuckling a coiled rope from his saddle pommel. Even as he walked toward the edge of the water, testing his footing on the treacherous mud, the scout heard Grote Kettleman's bellow of horror.

"Kettleman!" yelled Webb, shaking out a loop in the lariat. "I'll heave you a rope! Stand still!"

Kettleman tried to twist about, his face a white blob in the moonlight as he caught sight of Webb whirling the rope about his head, preparatory for the cast.

Caught knee-deep in lethal mire, Grote Kettleman could feel himself sinking, inch by inch, his fate made doubly certain by the sluicing waters which were now up to his neck. To allow Webb to rescue him would mean a death sentence, once he was tried by an impromptu court for the murder of Zeke Prichett. But even that prospect must have been preferable to drowning, for Kettleman's threshing arms grappled for the settling loop as Webb hurled the thirty-foot riata outward over the water.

Pulling the rope over his barrel-sized chest, Kettleman saw Webb pull it taut, then walk backward until he could dally the rope about the horn of Starface's saddle.

"Don't do any kickin' or strugglin', now," yelled Webb, as he led the horse toward the bank, taking up the slack. "We'll pull you out of there if we handle it right——"

With only his head showing above water, the blacksmith groaned as he felt Webb's horse throw its weight against the rope.

Then, with agonizing slowness, the killer felt his legs being pulled free of the sucking quicksand. The strain seemed to be disjointing his knees and hips; the rope was cutting into his muscle-slabbed chest, chafing his armpits.

Finally, with a forward lunge of Webb's horse, Kettleman's legs came free and he sloshed his way ashore to drop, exhausted and gasping for breath, on the grass at Webb's feet. The rescue accomplished, Webb hauled his rifle from scabbard,

and with a single bullet put Kettleman's pinto out of its misery. The horse had sunk too far in the quicksand to be rescued.

Reloading the smoking rifle, Webb turned to face Kettleman. Blood was gushing from the wound which the blacksmith had received when Webb's bullet had entered his body back at the wagon camp. The grey pallor of approaching death was on Kettleman's face, as he propped himself up on one elbow and stared up at Monte Webb.

"Sorry . . . I had to chuck . . . the gold . . . into the river," he gasped. "If I'd a' knowed . . . how this was goin' to end . . . an' that you was on the river bank hyar . . . I would a' tried to hang on to it——"

Monte Webb squatted down, torn with pity for the killer's suffering. He knew that Kettleman was doomed from loss of blood, his bullet wound torn open by the gruelling ordeal of being pulled from the jaws of the quicksand trap.

"I ain't . . . the man you want . . . nohow," continued Kettleman, his breath sawing through his teeth. "I rid out hyar tonight . . . with that gold . . . aimin' to turn it over . . . to my pard . . . the hombre who told me how to get it from Zeke Prichett——"

Webb knelt beside the dying blacksmith, his heart beating faster with excitement.

"You say you were going to meet someone out here, Kettleman?"

The blacksmith nodded, pointing across the narrow river toward the east bank, where the moonlight showed a dense hedge of willow and scrub cottonwood.

"He's over thar—now," groaned Kettleman. "You better —light a shuck out o' hyar—before he— —"

The hairs on the nape of Webb's neck stiffened, as he stared off across Elkhorn Creek to where Kettleman claimed his accomplice had waited his arrival.

"Who's over there, Kettleman?" cried Webb. "Who told you to rob Prichett? Was it the feller who was talking to Alabama Jones and Jute Flathers that night, about killin' Castle?"

Kettleman nodded, paroxysms of coughing bringing bloody flecks to his mouth as he struggled to speak.

"Yeah . . . yeah," he moaned. "And you can tell him . . .

it was me who told you his name . . . when you git him before . . . your kangaroo court. He—”

Spang! From somewhere across the river came a stab of flame out of the black bulwark of the Elkhorn thickets. Simultaneously with the crack of a rifle, Webb saw Kettleman jerk, then sag forward to gouge his face into the grass.

The ambush bullet had torn away the back of Kettleman's skull—and the blacksmith had taken his killer's name with him into eternity!

Instinct made Monte Webb leap to one side, putting Kettleman's bulk between him and the hidden gunman across the creek. And in so doing, the scout saved his life, as a high-calibred bullet bored through the space occupied by his body a second before!

Alarm shot through Webb as another gunshot roared from the willow thickets and a bullet whistled past his neck. Caught in the open moonlight, he was an easy target against the light-coloured cut bank. Swiftly Webb glanced about for a bush or a rock where he might be able to shoot back.

Then, for a fourth time, the dry-gulcher's rifle thundered, and Webb lurched under the impact of a bullet.

The rifle dropped from the scout's paralyzed hand as he staggered forward into knee-deep water. Then life seemed to drain from his muscles, and he pitched forward with a foamy splash to disappear under the sliding, moonlit ripples.

CHAPTER 10

DEATH WARNING

Gideon Castle reined his lather-flecked horse to a stop as a sharp crackle of gunshots sounded above the thudding of hoofs. The captain of the wagon train had tried desperately to overtake Monte Webb, who was riding after Grote Kettleman, but the scout had had too great a lead.

"Them shots are comin' from the gully yonder where Webb went into," muttered Castle, drawing a long-barrelled Paterson model Colt from his belt holster. "Danged if that salty jasper ain't shootin' it out with Kettleman, already!"

Spurring his pony, the Missourian sent the animal rocketing toward the rim of Elkhorn Creek. Then he reined up, eyes reflecting his horror as he took in a brief, tragic tableau on the river bank below him.

He was in time to see Monte Webb jerk violently under the impact of a slug. Then he saw the scout pitch forward, to hit the water with a resounding splash.

Castle leaped out of the saddle, realizing the set-up immediately. Grote Kettleman could not have fired the ambush shot from the willow brake across the stream, for the blacksmith's body was sprawled on the river bank at the very spot where Webb had been dropped.

Even as Castle's boots hit the dirt, the hidden gunman across the river opened fire at his sky-lined target and slugs threw the gravel against the old wagoner's legs.

Realizing the peril of remaining in full view against the moonlit sky, Castle leaped down the short cut bank, his own six-gun roaring as he opened fire at the spot across the stream where he had seen the ambusher's gun flashes.

Even as he reached the level of the river's edge, Castle caught a glimpse of the dry-gulcher riding up on to the eastern bank of Elkhorn Creek, a ghostly black figure in the moonlight.

Castle whipped up his gun, then held his fire as he realized

that the dry-gulcher was out of six-shooter range. Glancing about him, he saw Webb's Spencer carbine lying at the water's edge. With a yell, Castle holstered his short gun and leaped to snatch up the seven-shot rifle. But before he could slap the stock to his cheek and draw a bead on the dry-gulcher across the river, the man had spurred out of sight beyond the ridge which flanked the stream.

Then, immediately in front of where he stood, Castle saw Webb's body come to the surface of the creek, rolling suddenly as the current tugged at it.

"I'm comin', Webb!"

Castle yelled the words, but he was certain that Monte Webb had been a dead man when he toppled forward into the river. Nevertheless, the old wagoner slogged out into the muddy stream, wading waist-deep as he reached Webb's floating form an instant before the scout rolled under the surface once more.

Working with difficulty because he was holding Webb's rifle in one hand, Castle got a grip on the buckskin collar of the scout's jacket. With superhuman effort, he tugged upward until Webb's head and shoulders were above the river. Then, bracing his body against the gentle tug of the current, Castle headed shoreward, dragging the unconscious scout behind him.

Spent and gasping, the old man tossed the rifle out on the grass alongside Grote Kettleman's sprawled corpse, and pulled Webb's right arm over his shoulder. At last, bent almost double under the weight he was carrying, Castle waded out on the slimy bank, dragged Webb's dripping body on to the grass, and then dropped gasping alongside the scout.

Staring off through the night to southward, the wagon-train captain saw the ghostly figure of the dry-gulcher as horse and rider swam across the creek to gain the west bank. But, just as Castle snatched up Webb's long-range Spencer once more, he saw the fleeing rider vanish around a bend of the curving river canyon.

A choking cough snapped Castle's attention away from the escaping dry-gulcher, and he gasped with surprise as he saw Webb roll over, gagging and retching from the river water he had inhaled into his lungs.

Gideon Castle got busy, then. Rolling Webb over on his

stomach, he straddled the scout's body and got his hands under his waist. Then he tugged upward and downward in a pumping motion, to assist the unconscious man in emptying the river water from his lungs.

Not until Webb was breathing freely once more did the old man cease his labours of resuscitation. The scout had undoubtedly filled his lungs with air before plunging into the river; that much had been an instinctive reflex. But another thirty seconds under water, and Castle knew that Webb would have drowned.

A few minutes later the scout's eyelids were fluttering open. Still dazed, Webb lay quietly while Castle unlaced his buckskin jacket. Stripped to the waist, Webb's muscular torso revealed a long, red gash across his ribs, under the right arm-pit—a bullet furrow, where the ambusher's slug had sliced through flesh and nicked bone.

That, then, had been the shot which had knocked Webb out and tumbled him into Elkhorn Creek. Castle shuddered, realizing that his arrival had come barely in time to save the scout's life.

Reaching over to where a whisky bottle neck glinted from one of Grote Kettleman's hip pockets, Castle uncorked the flask and rammed the bottle neck between Webb's lips.

Choking and sputtering as the fiery liquor coursed down his throat, the scout propped himself up on one elbow and shoved the bottle away from his mouth. For an instant, he stared without recognition at the dripping figure of the man before him. Then his face relaxed, as he recognized his friend.

"Gid," gasped the scout, after a severe coughing spell, during which he rid his windpipe of some more creek water. "Did you--did you see—"

Castle nodded, forcing the scout to take another swallow of the whisky.

"Yeah, I seen the dirty bush-whacker who was shootin' at you, son," he answered. "He got away clean. But we can be thankful I was able to fish you out o' the crick here before you foundered."

Still shaky at the knees, Webb struggled to his feet and looked about him. Not until he had stared at Grote Kettleman's body, and the nearby carcase of the outlaw's horse,

did his mind bridge the gap which had been blanked out by the dry-gulcher's bullet raking his body.

" You say—the ambusher—made his getaway, Gid?"

Castle pointed off to the south, his face grim in the moonlight.

" Lit a shuck like the devil was after him, Monte. You any idea who 'twas?"

Webb shook his head, running fingers gingerly along the bleeding bullet gash on his side.

" All I saw was gun flashes," Webb answered. " The skunk killed Grote Kettleman here. Kettleman was ridin' out here to meet the ambusher, Gid. I . . . I didn't find out who it was Kettleman was aimin' to split that gold with."

For a long minute, the two men stood staring down at the corpse of the murdered blacksmith.

" I hate to have to break this news, Gid," Webb said finally, " but the creek there got your keg of gold." He went on to describe how he had overtaken Grote Kettleman attempting to cross the quicksand-bedded stream, and how the blacksmith had dropped the heavy cask into the deepest part of the Elkhorn, forever beyond recovery.

" Reckon the loss o' the gold is secondary," Castle said, when Webb had finished speaking. " I—I sure hate to go back to the wagons and tell the folks though. All the money them families had was banked in that little keg."

Monte Webb picked up his rifle and walked over to where his star-faced sorrel was grazing in the grass, undisturbed by the grim shoot-out which had so nearly resulted in its master's death.

" I'll send some of the boys over in the mornin' to bury Kettleman," Castle said, as he and Webb led the scout's pony up the cut bank to the spot where the wagoner's dun gelding was waiting. " In the meantime, I'm wonderin' who that dry-gulcher was?"

Scudding clouds dimmed the full moon, so that visibility was cut down to a point where they could barely see the looming bulk of Independence Rock, a mile to the southward. Against the ebony backdrop of the granite landmark, the white hoods of the Missouri wagons were dimly visible. And somewhere off in the darkness, Grote Kettleman's co-conspirator and murderer was making his getaway across the prairie.

Neither man spoke as they rode slowly back across the Wyoming plain to the sleeping camp. A vigilant sentry challenged them as they approached from the north, and they recognized Captain Ross Flagg as the man standing watch duty.

"You see anybody comin' back here before we did, Ross?" asked Gideon Castle, as they reined up in front of the army man.

Flagg shook his head, the crossed-sabres insignia on his hat glittering in the moonlight.

"Nobody but you two," he said. "I saw the two of you ride out, hell bent for election, just after Grote Kettleman rode out of here. What was the idea, anyhow? Where's Grote?"

Briefly, Castle described the circumstances of Zeke Prichett's murder and Kettleman's flight with the community gold horde. Flagg's face showed his amazement as the old wagon captain told of Kettleman's death at Elkhorn Creek, and the mystery of the ambusher who had so nearly brought about Webb's death.

A few minutes later, after unsaddling their horses and turning them out to graze inside the corral of wagons, Castle and Webb made their way to Zeke Prichett's tent, where the dead man's lantern still shed its eerie glow inside the canvas.

"Our ambusher friend has beat us back here, Webb!" cried Castle, as they pushed their way into the tent where Prichett's body lay. "What do you make of that?"

Aghast, Webb stared at a white-painted tail gate of a wagon that had been placed sideways across Prichett's corpse, some time during their absence.

Painted on the board with black axle grease was a message--a message which both men knew must have been written by the same man who had fired at them from ambush, thirty minutes before:

MONTE WEBB—KETTLEMAN'S DEATH TONIGHT WAS ACCIDENTAL—THE BULLET THAT KILLED HIM WAS MEANT FOR YOU. THIS IS TO WARN YOU THAT IF YOU DO NOT LEAVE THE WAGON TRAIN TOMORROW AND RETURN TO FORT LARAMIE, YOU WILL NEVER SEE OREGON. NEXT TIME MY BULLET WON'T MISS.

The message was printed, giving no hint as to the hand-writing of its author.

Webb looked up to see Gideon Castle's worried eyes fixed upon him.

"Son, that jasper means what he says," Castle said slowly. "You better take his advice an' head back to Laramie, come daylight. Somebody in this train is out to get you, same as they were near to get me——"

Webb shook his head. There was a look of bleak determination on his face.

"No, Gid," he said firmly. "I'm stickin'—until we get to Oregon. Because I've got a hunch who's back of this killin' tonight—an' whenever he comes into the open, I'll be ready for him."

CHAPTER II

Buffalo Hunt

To Gideon Castle, next morning, went the unhappy task of notifying his Missouri neighbours that the savings which they had converted into gold dust and "banked" in an oaken keg, at the outset of their westward trek, had been forever lost in the quicksand bottom of Elkhorn Creek.

The looks of anger and distrust which the assembled emigrants gave, upon hearing their captain's announcement, quickly vanished when it became known that the theft was due to an error on Zeke Prichett's part, the night before, in trusting Grote Kettleman—an error for which Prichett had paid with his life.

"We won't be travellin' today, friends," went on Castle, speaking to the crowd from the elevated seat of his own covered wagon. "Instead, we'll pause hyar at Independence Rock, to bury the remains of our friend, Zeke Prichett."

Castle mopped his face with a scarlet bandanna, staring out over the silent, despairing crowd before him. The fruits of many years of toil, the proceeds of many a sold home-stead back in Missouri, and many a family legacy had been contained in that treasure cask which had been entrusted to their leader for safe keeping until they reached the end of the Oregon Trail.

"I know this is goin' to change the plans of many of you," Castle went on. "Lots of us, includin' Mrs. Castle an' myself, will arrive at our destination plumb broke, so far as finances are concerned. But we're half way there. Them as want to return to Missouri can do so. Them as want to turn off the trail an' head for California can do so, when we git through South Pass."

June Castle, seated on the wagon tongue below her father, got to her feet and moved away from the wagons. It wrenches her heart to witness the grief and shock on the faces of her friends and neighbours.

Making her way toward the lofty wall of Independence

Rock, the girl caught sight of Monte Webb in the act of mounting his star-faced sorrel a short distance away from the assembled crowd. It was the first chance the girl had had to see their trail guide alone since they had left Fort Laramie. To June, it seemed that Webb had intentionally avoided her. His consultations with Gideon Castle had always been away from their wagons, at night; and an hour before the start of each day's trek, Webb was always out on the trail, scouting for Indian signs or otherwise attending to his duties as trail guide.

"Monte!" called June Castle, as she saw the scout gathering up his reins. "Daddy says we're not travelling today."

Webb touched his hat brim, his face bleak as he looked down at the girl.

"No, we ain't travellin' until tomorrow, Miss June," he said. "Me, I'm headin' out to do a little buffalo huntin'. There won't be any buffalo meat to be had, once we get through South Pass and into the desert country north o' Salt Lake. Some buffalo steaks would go mighty good, after the sowbelly an' pemmican an' salt pork we been livin' on."

June paused, disturbed by the impersonal, almost indifferent tone in which Webb had addressed her.

"Monte," she said hesitantly, looking up at him. "You—I haven't offended you in any way since we left Fort Laramie, have I?"

He laughed softly. "Of course not, Miss June. What gave you that idea?"

June coloured under his frank gaze.

"Well, I—Oh, nothing, I guess. Only I haven't seen you or had a chance to talk with you—about the West, I mean—since we started. Couldn't you take me hunting with you this morning?"

Webb tugged at the fringe of his buckskin gauntlets, his pulse quickening at the girl's request.

"You're perfectly welcome to ride with me," he answered, "only—seein' as how you're engaged to marry Ross Flagg, and all—maybe he'd better come along, too, don't you think?"

June glanced toward the nearby camp.

"No," she said quickly. "Ross is still sleeping, I think. He was on watch duty until after midnight. Anyhow, he wouldn't care. Wait—I'll bring my pony right away."

Ten minutes later the two were cantering away from the Independence Rock camp, unnoticed in the confusion which marked the breaking up of the assembly meeting.

Stirrup to stirrup, the clean, sage-scented air sweet in their nostrils, Webb and June rode steadily to the north-westward, toward the distant, silver-topped horizon of the Rocky Mountains. They topped a low, rolling ridge and dropped into a valley beyond, putting Independence Rock and the covered wagons out of view.

"There's one of the biggest buffalo herds you'll probably ever see, Miss June," said Webb, pointing a buckskin-sleeved arm to the north-west. "In fact, you won't see any buffalo at all, out in Oregon. And the rate they're bein' killed off, I got my doubts if your grandchildren will ever know what a buffalo looks like, if you don't tell 'em about today's hunt."

The girl laughed, squinting her eyes against the sun glare as she stared off across the rolling plains to where a sprawling brown blot stood out in sharp relief against the grey-green expanse.

"Probably six thousand head in that herd," the plainsman went on, as they pointed their horses toward the herd. "They're just breaking bed ground, an' they'll raise a big dust when they head for the Platte to drink. With luck, I'll be able to shoot enough meat to last the caravan for a week."

As the miles flung back behind cantering hoofs, the conversation of the pair ranged over a wide scope of topics—Webb's own brief years in the California gold camps, his father's death at Gettysburg, the letter of condolence which Monte had received at Fort Laramie, from President Lincoln himself—

Then, topping a final sage-dotted rise, Monte and June saw the vast buffalo herd directly below them, and fell silent before the breath-taking majesty of the scene.

The shaggy-humped animals, grazing in the lush prairie grass, appeared not to notice the approaching riders. Almost as far as the eye could reach, the terrain was black with moving buffalo—shaggy old bulls, restless cows, scampering heifers, even a few long-legged calves on the outskirts of the herd, keeping close to their mothers.

"It . . . it's beyond description," breathed June, her blue

eyes wide with excitement as she and Monte drew rein at the edge of the plain, only a hundred yards away from the fringe of the vast herd. "Looking at them, I can't blame the Indians for resenting us whites despoiling their hunting grounds."

Monte Webb reached down to draw his Spencer rifle from its saddle boot.

"You stay here, Miss June," he said, squinting tentatively along the polished barrel of his rifle. "Sometimes buffalo-herds start a stampede when shootin' begins. In that case, give your pony his head, he'll keep shy of the herd, no matter which way they begin millin'."

June drew a tighter rein, a flush of excitement on her sun-bronzed cheeks.

"I wish I'd brought a gun," she said. "I'm a pretty good shot, even if I am a girl. And what a story to tell my grandchildren—shooting a buffalo out in Wyoming!"

Before Webb could spur his sorrel toward the slow-moving herd, a sharp drumming of hoofbeats made him hip about in saddle, his heart beating with alarm.

"Be ready to ride, June!" he cried warningly. "That may be an Injun, scoutin' this herd. We——"

But the oncoming rider was not an Indian. Webb broke off, as the figure of Captain Ross Flagg shot over the ridge top and thundered down to a jouncing halt between the two riders. Flagg's narrow face was flaming red, the glinting fires of rage visible behind his slitted lids. And his horse was drenched with lather, indicating a hard ride from Independence Rock.

"June, ride back to the top of the hill!" Flagg ordered, his voice like a whiplash. "I've got a few things to say to this romantic Westerner that won't bear saying in front of a lady—especially the girl I'm going to marry!"

June flushed with anger. "You have no right to order me to leave like this!" she flared. "If you're angry because I came out hunting with Monte, you've no right to be. I thought you were asleep when we left, and I——"

Flagg reined closer to the girl's stirrup, his face going white as he struggled to check his rage.

"*Do as I say!*" Flagg rasped. "I'll have plenty to say to you, as soon as I've thrashed this blasted buckskin man!"

It was Webb who spurred his sorrel between them, before June Castle could give voice to the angry words of defiance which sprang to her lips.

"Do as your fiancé says, Miss June!" the scout said calmly. "Flagg here has been spoilin' for a fight ever since the night I brought you back from the Sioux camp. I reckon now's as good a time as any—for Flagg to see what he can do about thrashin' me."

For a moment the girl hesitated. Then, spurring her pony into a gallop, she headed back off toward the hilltop.

Without another word, the two men turned in saddle, nostrils flaring, mouths clamped in a grim line of hate. Of one accord, they dismounted, Flagg unbuckling his sabre-hung belt, Monte Webb replacing his buffalo rifle in its scabbard, then unstrapping his belt with its sheathed bowie knife and holstered Dragoon .44, which he hung over his saddlehorn. Then the two walked away from the horses, Webb stripping off his gauntlets and flinging them aside.

Squaring off, the two enemies faced each other like boxers in a prize ring.

"This fight ain't exactly justified, in one way," Webb said, his voice cool and unruffled. "Not that I won't relish beatin' you within an inch o' your life, Flagg. But would you mind tellin' me what we're battlin' about?"

Flagg had peeled off his blue-buttoned army coat, to expose a lean, wiry torso. Pound for pound, he was a perfect match for the case-hardened frontiersman; in height and reach they were likewise equal.

"You know, as well as I do!" Flagg raged, dropping into a boxer's defensive crouch. "You're trying to steal June from me."

The scout laughed, then sobered as if a mask had been snatched from his face.

"If I thought I had a chance," he shot back, "I'll be hanged if I wouldn't try to give you some competition, Flagg. But I know June wouldn't want a trail-ridin' Westerner who ain't had the schoolin' or polish her husband ought to have. The only thing I regret about her is that she's goin' to marry a yellow-livered——"

With a bawl of rage, Flagg charged in behind flailing fists, forcing Webb to step back before the ferocity of his

attack. A jolting right brought crimson spurting from the army man's nose and checked his onrush.

They sparred a moment, and then came together like colliding beasts in a primeval fury of fist against fist, a grunting, twisting, dust-showering grapple as of two wild animals locked in a fight to the death.

CHAPTER 12

A Girl's Courage

From her lofty elevation overlooking the scene of conflict, June Castle saw the struggling men rolling across the ground, out from under the sifting cloud of dust caused by their writhing feet. Even at that distance her ears caught the sawing of men's breath, the thud of fists hitting flesh, the scrape of boots on hard earth.

Monte Webb, fighting with the lusty appetite for action which years of clean outdoor living had engendered in him, found reason for amazement in Ross Flagg's capacity for taking punishment.

His eyes swelling shut from Webb's constant battering, his face a raw, bleeding pulp, the army man was giving as good as he got, landing terrific blows to jaw and midriff. Their first flush of hate gone, the fighters gave up their saloon brawl ferocity and settled into a slugging match, feinting and weaving, blocking punches with boxers' skill, going into clinches from which they broke, grunting with exhaustion. And then, staring through a dishevelled curtain of hair, Webb saw one of his jabbing lefts to the heart take its effect, saw Flagg reel back, face grey with pain, arms wavering.

Webb lunged forward, right fist cocked to land the knock-out blow for which he had been manoeuvring. Flagg saw the punch coming and rolled his head desperately to avoid the full, smoking impact of the scout's rock-hard knuckles.

Smack! The punch glanced off Flagg's jaw, but it carried sufficient steam to send the army man reeling backward, arms windmilling as he fought for balance.

Then Flagg sprawled on his back in a smoking curtain of dust, and Webb lurched forward, wiping blood and sweat from his palms, his chest heaving with laboured breathing.

"You've had enough, Flagg!" panted the buckskin-clad scout, wiping his blood-marked face with his sleeve. "I'm willin' to shake hands an' call it quits——"

Flagg's lips peeled back to expose a fanglike battery of

teeth. As he struggled to get up, his spread fingers encountered a biscuit-sized rock and coiled about it.

"I'll see you—in Hell—before I shake hands . . . with you!" Flagg said hoarsely, getting to his feet with the rock cradled in the cup of his palm. "There isn't room enough . . . for both of us . . . in that wagon train——"

Too late, Webb saw that the army man had a stone in his hand. He tried to duck as his adversary flung the missile with all his force at point-blank range.

The stone smashed through Webb's out-thrust guard and jolted hard against his chest, dropping him to his knees with a shower of stars assaulting his vision.

Sick, numb with pain, Webb sank to the ground. On all fours, head slumped between his shoulders, the scout heard his opponent moving to one side, preparatory to launching a murderous kick at his unprotected head.

Then fate intervened, before Flagg could engineer his foul attack. From the hillside overlooking the dusty scene came an ear-piercing scream:

"Monte! Ross! Run for your lives! The buffalo! *They're stampeding your way!*"

Staggering out of the thick dust which had masked his treacherous action from June Castle's eyes, Ross Flagg stared off to the westward. What he saw almost turned his spine to an icicle.

Moving toward the base of the hill like some manner of brown tidal wave came the vanguard of the buffalo herd!

Something—sight of the struggling men out on the plain, perhaps—had touched off the explosion which had turned six thousand peacefully grazing buffalo into a fast-moving juggernaut of destruction.

Already, Ross Flagg felt the earth trembling under his feet, from the pounding hoofs of that oncoming flood of brown, closely massed bodies. Wheeling, the army man headed for the nearby horses.

Monty Webb, his own ears catching the harsh thunder of the stampede, pushed himself into a kneeling position, struggled to rise, then fell back on his elbows. Through the settling dust, he saw Flagg's lather-drenched horse shy away from the army captain, as he made a frantic grab for the saddler's trailing reins.

Panic-stricken by the roar of the oncoming stampede, Flagg's horse suddenly bolted, stirrups flapping wildly.

Only for an instant did the army man pause, staring wild-eyed at his runaway mount. Then, his gaze swerving from the buffalo herd to the huddled figure of the scout, Flagg sprinted toward Webb's waiting sorrel.

With a hoarse yell, Webb struggled dazedly to his feet. But he was too late. Vaulting into the saddle without touching stirrups, Ross Flagg drove spurs into Starface's flanks and sent the horse rocketing up the hillside toward the safety of the hogback where June was waiting!

Rage shot through Webb as he started his wobbly-kneed flight toward the slope. By no possible stretch of the imagination would he be able to gain the hillside in time to escape destruction under the mangling hoofs of the stampeding buffalo. And without his guns, it would be impossible to stem the oncoming tidal wave of animals by shooting the leaders——

And then, glancing up the hill in the direction Flagg had taken in flight, Webb caught sight of a flying figure on horseback, headed down the slope directly at him.

"No . . . no! June . . . go back . . . you can't make it——"

Webb's frantic yell was lost in the thunder of the stampede at his back. He flung himself on, not daring to look behind as he saw June Castle spurring her pony at top speed down the brush-dotted slope.

A moment later she was skidding the horse to a stop beside him, and her firm, strong hand was in his as he summoned his ebbing strength and sprang aboard the horse, behind the saddle cantle. Webb's spurs raked the double-laden pony into action, as he flung an arm around the girl to seize the saddlehorn.

One huge buffalo, head lowered until its nostrils seemed to scrape the earth, shot in front of the pony, barely missing contact with the flying hoofs. Twisting his head about Webb saw death bearing down hard as the tidal wave of brown backs and clacking horns threatened to engulf them in a pandemonium of sound——

And then it was over, as June's game pony, itself terrorized into an incredible burst of speed, shot up the hillside through the ragged fringe of the stampeding herd.

At the hill's crest, Webb slid to the ground, and helped June from the saddle. Arm in arm, the pair stared off in fascinated horror at the scene below. The place where Monte and Ross Flagg had struggled was now a dust-clouded blur of animals. As if the whole dark-brown mass of the prairie were convulsed in an earthquake, the buffalo herd thundered on toward the Platte, where the wild stampede would end at the river's edge.

Looking down into the girl's face, Monte Webb managed to spread his battered lips into a grin.

"I reckon you and I are even on the life-savin' score, June," he said huskily. "Only I'd a heap rather buck a village full of Injuns than I would run into a buffalo stampede like you just done. I don't reckon I'll ever forget it."

June was about to speak when she suddenly drew away from Webb, to stare off past his shoulder, her eyes ablaze with anger. Webb turned and his eyes darkened. Trotting up to meet them, astride the sorrel, came Ross Flagg.

His bruised face a battered edition of its former sleek good looks, the army man dismounted, obviously abashed by the iciness of his fiancée's stare.

"You . . . you left Monte down there to die!" June cried accusingly. "I think I'll always hate you for that, Ross!"

Flagg winced as if a knife had been thrust through him.

"But I thought Webb was knocked out," he protested. "I figured a delay would mean both of us would die, so I—Well, Webb, I'll apologize—if you'll accept it."

Webb glanced around, to see that June had turned to bury her face against the withers of her horse, her shoulders convulsed with sobbing. Did the girl know that her fiancé had employed a rock to finish their fight? Webb doubted it. Flagg's foul tactics had been hidden behind the pall of dust.

And now Flagg was openly apologizing for his cowardly flight, in June's presence, and was begging Webb's forgiveness. Not to grant it under such circumstances, Webb knew, would be only to brand himself as a poor loser in June's eyes.

"I ain't able to shake hands on it, Flagg," he said finally. "I only shake hands with a friend, an' I don't reckon you an' me was cut out to be friends. But I got a compromise request to make."

The army man walked forward, to put a hand tenderly on June's quivering shoulder. Without taking his eyes from the girl, Flagg answered:

"I can't do any more'n offer you my hand, Webb. I . . . I must have lost my head down there, when I saw those buffalo heading towards us. June knows I'll do anything in my power to make amends."

Webb's lips compressed as he saw June lift her tear-stained face for the kiss which her fiancé pressed against her forehead. In that moment, he knew that Flagg's glib tongue had restored himself in the girl's favour.

"We've got a long road ahead of us, Flagg," Webb said bitterly. "It would be bad for the morale of the caravan if you and I were open enemies. Will you give me your word of honour not to renew this difference between us—at least until we get to Oregon?"

Flagg's eyes taunted the scout, as he drew June Castle against him.

"So far as I'm concerned, Webb, our score is already settled in full. If there's any trouble between us, I am sure it won't be provoked by me."

During the fortnight which followed their departure from the halfway mark at Independence Rock, Monte Webb kept himself aloof from all members of the Missouri caravan. His reticence to join the young people at their music and frivolity, at night after the watches were posted and the supper dishes washed, was noticed by the elders, and discussed in the privacy of their family wagons.

But the steely-eyed young Westerner, in whose hands they had placed the responsibility of guiding them safely through to Oregon was given a tacit vote of confidence by every member of the train. If he chose to keep his own counsel of nights, perhaps it was because of the gravity of his responsibilities. Certainly it was no affair of theirs.

June Castle, however, knew that Webb's change in attitude stemmed from the day of the buffalo stampede, and his fight with Ross Flagg, and she finally came to the reluctant conclusion that the scout was sulking over the fact that Flagg had beaten him in fair fight that day.

The girl's instinct and judgment told her that such an attitude was not consistent with her appraisal of Webb's

character; but the facts were there, and it was obvious that he was pointedly avoiding any contact with her.

But personal associations and worries were secondary to the rigours of the long days which followed, as the caravan of wagons made its intermittent way across Wyoming and through South Pass, moving by fifteen-mile daily treks in the manner of some great inch-worm working its way over the Continental Divide.

The vast buffalo herds of the open plains gave way to antelope and elk, and occasional mountain sheep poised on distant crags. Mountain grasses replaced the sage of the prairies, and at night the screams of panthers and timber wolves were more frequent than the familiar yapping of the plains coyotes.

Out of South Pass, the caravan deserted the main Oregon Trail ruts which branched southward toward Fort Bridger and California, and took the famous Sublette cut-off which led them to Soda Springs in the country due north of Great Salt Lake.

From Soda Springs, Webb led the creaking, grimy-hooded wagons north-westward through country later to be known as Idaho, bound for the nearest settlement, Fort Hall.

As was customary, the scout rode several miles in advance of the train, making certain of the next camp-site's grass, water and fuel supplies, and keeping an ever-vigilant eye open for hostile Shoshones, Utes or Blackfeet. He was jogging back toward the wagons one mid-afternoon, intending to supervise the crossing of Whetstone River, when he was met by Gideon Castle.

As a rule, the old Missourian remained with the caravan, either driving one of his own Conestogas, or assisting neighbours in yoking up fresh spans of oxen, repairing damaged wagon wheels or tongues, or the similar routine duties of a wagon captain.

Something special—probably trouble on the river crossing—must have accounted for Castle's riding out to hunt for the caravan scout in this manner, Webb knew.

But Gideon Castle brought no bad news, although his ruddy face was grave as he met the returning scout along the trailside. After a perfunctory exchange of greetings, the two headed back toward the crawling dust column which

marked the slow-moving covered wagons, some three miles to the south-east.

"Webb, I been aimin' to chaw the rag with you for a coon's age," Gideon Castle finally spoke, peering sidewise at the stony-faced young scout riding at his stirrup. "You got a bur under your saddle, son, an' don't tell me you ain't. What's been wrong with you, the past three weeks?"

Webb shrugged, his eyes roving along the far-flung peaks of the Rockies, as if he were fascinated by the splendour of their snow-covered slopes.

"You used to mingle with the folks, stoppin' to chat with the children an' help oldsters grease an animal's sore hoof, an' scch," the Missourian persisted. "What in tarnation's got into you, son, since we left Independence Rock?"

Webb turned, and his ice-blue gaze was bitter.

"I *have* had somethin' on my mind, Gid," he admitted. "I ain't sure yet, but I got a pretty good hunch I know who the skunk was who was plottin' with Jute Flathers an' Alabama Jones that night to kill you an' rob you, Gid. The same skunk who had Grote Kettleman steal that gold from Zeke Prichett, an' who later tried to ambush me over on Elkhorn Crick after the gold was lost in the quicksand."

Gideon Castle tugged at his beard, his gaze fixed on Webb's grim face.

"I been doin' some thinkin', too," the wagon captain said. "Who you figger it was, son? Mebbeso our dedoocin' will jibe!"

The scout hesitated, fumbling at the chin cord of his beaver felt hat, his eyes avoiding Castle's face.

"I hate to name any names until I got more proof—" he began.

"The devil with that!" Castle exploded. "You mean you don't like to hurt my feelin's by talkin' about my future son-in-law, don't you?"

The two men reined to a halt, staring at each other with mutual understanding that needed no words to elaborate it.

"Yes," Webb said finally. "I'm convinced that Ross Flagg is the man we want—the man Grote Kettleman almost named, before he was shot from ambush that night. The man who wrote that warnin' letter to me an' left it on a board on top of Zeke Prichett's dead body."

Castle's nostrils flared with pent-up emotion. He piled gnarled hands on his saddle horn, and stared off at the approaching dust cloud, across the hills.

"I wouldn't dare mention my suspicions to June," the old man said finally. "But, hang it, Webb, the signs p'int to Ross Flagg. It looks mighty suspicious that Flagg was out on lookout duty the night you overheard those three men plottin' to murder me, and also the night Grote Kettleman lit a shuck with that gold. It would have been plumb easy for Flagg to have ridden out to Elkhorn Creek to meet Kettleman that night, an' start shootin' at you after he killed Kettleman to keep him from talkin'. Plumb easy for him to ride back to the caravan without bein' challenged by a sentry, because he was a sentry hisself—an' easy enough for him to have writ that warnin', afore we got back——"

Castle's words made the scout's heart pound with excitement, for the old man's reasoning matched his own reconstruction of Flagg's guilt, to the letter.

"Sooner or later, Flagg'll tip his hand," Webb said. "When he does, I don't aim to be caught nappin'. But if I have to kill Flagg in self-defence, it means your daughter's life will be ruined, Gid. She'll hate me till the end of her days."

Castle shot the trail scout a peculiar sidelong glance.

"I ain't so shore, son," he said cryptically. "Ross Flagg's rushed June offn her feet since she was a little gal in pigtauls back in Hannibal. She ain't married to him yit, an' if he's the type o' scoundrel you an' me got him figgered to be, I'll be hanged if she ever will be!"

Webb gulped hard, as if struggling with a difficult decision. Then, reining over closer to Castle as if afraid the nearby rocks and brush slumps might have ears, the scout said:

"Gid, seein' as how we're exchangin' confidences, I got somethin' important to get off my chest. I know I kin trust you to keep your lip close-hobbled?"

Castle chuckled behind his beard, as the two men gathered up their bridle reins and resumed their way toward the wagon train.

"I'll make it easy for ye, son!" laughed the old man. "You've fell in love with June, only you figger she's Ross Flagg's proppity, so you won't come out in the open with your feelin's. Is that it?"

Warm colour rose in Monte Webb's face, suffusing his deep sun-tanned complexion with a ruddiness which brought a bellow of mirth from the old man.

"Well, Gid," stammered Webb, "I . . . I reckon you hit the nail on the——"

He broke off, interrupted by a far-off crackle of gun fire. Instantly the two straightened in saddle, heads cocked apprehensively. Then, of one accord, they spurred into a gallop.

"That shootin' is comin' from the wagons!" yelled Castle, his voice rising above the rush of wind in their ears. "You figger there was Injuns hidin' in Whetstone River canyon?"

Webb's face blanched as another volley of shots sounded from beyond the crest of the ridge, up which they were pounding at top speed.

As Castle and Webb topped the rise and reined to a halt, a chaotic scene met their eyes.

Swarming out of the river-bank brush lining Whetstone River came a band of black-bearded, buffalo-coated riders, sweeping out on to the prairie where the wagons were massing up at the river ford preparatory to crossing the shallow stream.

The riders were pouring salvo after salvo of bullets at the disordered wagons, in the manner of an army storming an objective with cavalry, breaking up the platoons of wagons as the Missouri emigrants, taken by surprise, and without leadership, prepared to make individual stands.

"Them ain't Injuns!" yelled Castle, as they started down toward the battleground at top speed. "They're white men, Webb!"

"Yeah," answered Webb, hauling his rifle from scabbard. "Rencgades from the Mormon country. I been afraid we might meet up with 'em. They're ramrodded by a salty guerrilla named Red Kelson—and they're after that herd o' cattle and our spare horses, Gid. They won't care how many folks they slaughter to get hold of that stock, neither!"

CHAPTER 13 —

Renegade Raiders

Splashing at top speed across the shallow ford of the Whetstone, Monte Webb and Gideon Castle separated as they rode out on to the grassy meadow where the pitched battle was being enacted.

The wagon boss was as puzzled and overcome with surprise as the majority of the emigrants were. But to Webb's frontier-bred viewpoint, the set-up was plain to read. The guerrillas, masses of whom were attacking each of the six groups of wagons in the caravan, were undoubtedly roaming outcasts from the Salt Lake country south of the Utah line.

Webb had heard, from other plainsmen and overland travellers, of the depredations of the criminal gangs who had been ousted from the white settlements of Brigham Young and his followers—riffraff from the California gold camps, the backwash of wanted owlhooters from the East, gunhawks and professional gamblers and half-breed cowpunchers from the Mexican border country. All these had been drawn to the Salt Lake country as if by a magnet, seeking to prey on the hard-working, devout Mormons and the wealth they possessed.

Expelled into the wilderness by the staunch "Saints" who were determined to build a new civilization for themselves in the desert of Utah, these renegades, under a leader known as Red Kelson, had taken to preying on Oregon-bound wagon trains.

These facts were in Monte Webb's mind, as he slapped rifle to shoulder and started picking out targets among the hard-riding killers who were already stampeding the Missouri beef herd out toward the grassy hills south of the trail's route.

Over a hundred raiders were pitting themselves against vastly superior Missouri forces; but the renegades had the element of surprise in their favour.

Undoubtedly the guerrillas had come charging out of a nearby ravine where they had stationed themselves after Webb had scouted the trail for Indian sign earlier that day.

Their first withering fire had emptied a score or more of wagon seats, as Webb could tell by the driverless wagons which were now milling about in circles, drawn by lumbering, panicked ox teams.

Into the thick of the dusty mêlée Webb flung himself, emptying his Spencer and reloading with grim desperation. The wagoners had ceased trying to form themselves into a ring, to fight off the invaders. Now the elemental laws of self-preservation were in command of the situation, and Monte Webb knew that no shouted orders of his would be heard in the bedlam. It was kill or be killed.

Dust clouded the scene. Riderless horses flashed here and there through the confusion, indicating that the defensive fire of the beleaguered Missourians was beginning to take its toll of the desert raiders.

Then, as quickly as the attack had come, the whiskered raiders withdrew to the southward, where a small army of outlaws had already hazed the wagon train's livestock over the first ridge, heading for the broken country in the direction of Great Salt Lake.

Half-hearted cheers went up from the Missourians, as they poured a final volley of lead at the retreating renegades. But Monte Webb, dismounting in the midst of the confused tangle of wagons, knew that the caravaneers had scored no victory.

Emigrant guns had not driven away the whiskered gunmen. Webb knew that. The renegades had attacked the caravan with but one purpose in mind; to run off the rich booty represented by the sleek cattle with which the Missourians planned to stock their farms, when they reached Oregon.

With the stolen cattle would be a score or more of prime saddle horses and a scattering of mules. The slower oxen would be abandoned, probably, to die of thirst in the desert, unless the renegades' headquarters were near at hand.

A vagrant wind lifted the swirling dust raised by the departing raiders, and revealed a scene so awful in its aspect that Monte Webb felt nausea claw at him.

Dead and dying men and women lay about the ground, with the broken bodies of children who had been shot down while tagging alongside the wagons in their bare feet, later to be run down by renegade horses, or crushed by the wheels of runaway wagons.

Luckily, the slow-footed oxen could not stampede with the covered wagons; most of the spans had already halted and were placidly grazing.

Remounting, Webb sought out the wagon belonging to Gideon Castle. To his intense relief, he saw the white faces of Mrs. Castle and June peering through the puckered oval opening in the hood, smoking rifles in their hands.

"The renegades have gone!" shouted Webb, leaning from the saddle to seize the old army bugle which Gideon Castle carried on his wagon seat. "All women out! Get fires lighted to boil water and attend to the wounded!"

The strident bugle blast seized the attentions of the stunned Missourians, snapped them out of horrified trances to the reality of the catastrophe which had overtaken them. Gradually, the men and boys began gathering about the scout in the middle of the scattered wagons.

Peering down over the sea of tragic, haggard faces, Webb shouted:

"Get those wagons into a circle, men. I don't think the renegades will return, but we must be prepared to resist another attack in case they want to get rifles and ammunition and grub. Tell your womenfolk to attend to all wounded persons before worrying about the dead. I'm dependin' on everyone to keep their heads——"

From the outskirts of the crowd came the strident voice of Ross Flagg, who elbowed his way through the silent throng to glare up at the mounted scout.

"There," shouted the army man, shaking an accusing finger at the buckskin-clad figure above them, "is the man responsible for this massacre, friends and neighbours! As our trail scout, Monte Webb was responsible for clearing our trail for us, and for warning us if Indians or renegades were trying to ambush us! I——"

Flagg broke off, as he stared up at the levelled bore of Webb's .44 six-gun.

"This is no time for personalities or who's to blame for what!" the scout said grimly. "The fact remains that your cattle have been stolen, and are being run away into the hills. The men who stole them have killed many of your loved ones and must be punished."

Webb saw Gideon Castle pushing his way through the

crowd, and he was grateful for the wagon captain's arrival. There was every chance that Ross Flagg might have been able to fan the heat of vengeance in the hearts of the bereaved men about him, to the point where they might lose their heads and demand that their trail guide be lynched. But Gideon Castle, clear-headed and respected leader that he was, would be in a position to counter-balance Flagg's hate.

"Gid, I want you to select one hundred of your best men during the next hour," Webb continued, his voice giving no hint of the concern he felt. "I'm going to trail those renegades, and see where they bed down our stock for the night. It won't be far. When I come back here to the wagons, I want your men armed to the teeth, and as many of them as possible mounted. We've got a big job of vengeance on our hands, friends—as well as gettin' our cattle back."

An aisle spread in the crowd, as Webb spurred his sorrel toward the southward, holstering his .44 as he rode. Soon he had put the caravan behind him, and was following the hoof-trampled trail of the escaping renegades.

Turning in saddle before topping the first rise south of the Oregon Trail, Webb's face grew bleak. The renegades' pitched battle, devastating as it had been, had consumed less than five minutes of time, the gunmen keeping the wagon drivers busy while their henchmen drove off the cattle herd in the rear.

But in those catastrophic five minutes, Gideon Castle's train had been shattered and flung about the terrain as if by a Kansas tornado. Webb was glad when the intervening hill shut from his ears the anguished cries of dying men and beasts, the wailing of bereaved folk and the voice of Gideon Castle, shouting crisp orders to bring order out of the chaos.

Webb had no doubt but that many of the Missourians, at first thought, would share Ross Flagg's belief that he, Monte Webb, had been negligent in his duty as their trail scout; that he should have spotted the ambushed raiders in time to have warned the emigrant train.

Later, he might convince them that the outriders who flanked the long string of wagons had the duty of scouting the ravines and sparse-timbered hilltops for enemies lying in wait for the train. No doubt the corpses of the flank riders on the south side of the trail would be found where

they had been bullet-dumped from saddle, shot from ambush before they knew that danger was imminent.

But the fact remained, now, that the renegades had made away with a rich booty in the herd of livestock on which the settlers depended to make their start in Oregon; the livestock must be recovered, even if the renegades scattered in the Utah malpais and were never punished. Unless the stock were recovered, this raid, coming on the heels of the loss of their gold, might well convince the Missourians that they should return home, here when Oregon was almost in sight beyond the western horizon.

Following a curving boulder-strewn ridgeline to the south and west, Webb had ridden less than two miles from the scene of the massacre when he caught sight of the stolen cattle being hazed into the broken country beyond.

The cattle were almost surrounded by the renegades on horseback, and they were keeping the herd bunched so compactly that the trail drive was virtually an organized stampede, moving at high speed and scheduled to end only when the animals themselves were too winded and hoofsore to continue.

Webb was familiar with this section of the country, having spent his boyhood in Idaho's primitive, unsettled wild lands. He was almost certain, now, that the renegades would be grazing their stolen cattle in Shoshone Basin, a wild area ringed by cliffs and known to be an outlaw nest.

"They'll prob'ly bed down at the entrance of the Basin tonight, where the Whetstone cuts through the cliffs," Webb muttered, heading back toward the wagon train. "With a hundred men, we ought to be able to get most of those cattle back, and send a few of Kelson's bad men to boot hill in the bargain. If——"

Webb's sorrel shied violently at that instant, jumping away from a clump of dwarf cedars to the scout's left. Before Webb could see what had alarmed Starface, a harsh voice lashed out of the cedars:

"Elevate, hombre! We got you under a three-way drop!"

Webb lifted his arms, mentally berating himself for having walked into a trap. Out from the cedars came three barrel-chested, bushy-whiskered renegades, leading horses, and each of them holding guns on the scout's midriff.

"Climb down and cool yore saddle, pardner!" jeered one of the trio, a towering giant of six feet seven, whose cinnamon beard informed Webb that he might be facing Red Kelson in person.

"Take her easy, an' mebbeso you won't get hurt, son!" rasped the red-bearded giant. "We're wonderin' if you're connected with that bunch o' wagons we just jumped. If you ain't you're safe."

Dismounting, Monte Webb stood helpless as the red-whiskered outlaw strode forward and jerked his .44 six-gun from holster. Glancing over his shoulder at his two shaggy-jawed henchmen who had moved up behind him, the outlaw said triumphantly:

"This is the trail scout who was leadin' them wagons, boys. With my own eyes, I seen this yahoo kill Gordon Anderson an' smash Jack Lafferty's arm, during the fight. An' this is the skunk who put a bullet through your brother's noggin before I give the order to withdraw, Polson."

The killer addressed as Polson stepped up to the red-whiskered man's side, his eyes slitted with hate as he regarded the taut-faced man in buckskins.

"I had you notched in my gun sights, back there on the trail," Polson snarled. "But you was ridin' too fast, an' I missed. But I ain't missin' now, by Satan!"

As he spoke, Polson whipped a Colt .45 from the basket-woven holster at his thigh, and thrust the muzzle into the trail scout's chest. In the same motion the renegade killer thumbed back the knurled hammer for the shot that would smash Monte Webb's heart asunder before he could lower his arms.

CHAPTER 14

Six-Gun Rescue

Even as Monte Webb braced himself for the expected shock of a slug ripping through his chest, he saw Polson's trigger finger suddenly freeze. At the same moment a sharp clatter of hoofs on rubble sounded behind Webb. The scout saw Polson's swarthy face drain of colour.

"Haul back that smoke pole you're ticklin' my friend's ribs with," a voice boomed, "or I'll blast your mangy head offn yore shoulders!"

Polson fell back, the gun dropping from his grasp as he lifted his arms above his head. The red-whiskered killer and his other partner followed suit, as the shadow of Webb's rescuer fell across them.

Unable to fathom the miracle that had spared him on the brink of eternity, Webb turned slowly about and let his eyes range up the brisket and withers of the powerful buckskin mustang reined up beside him.

Seated in the battered range saddle atop the mustang was a striking figure in a shaggy buffalo-hide coat, a furry coonskin cap and buckskin pants, leggings and moccasins.

Webb could not see the man's face for it was well masked by a tangled beard and by the stock of a long-barrelled Sharps rifle which the rider held trained on Polson's midriff. But there was something vaguely familiar about that heavy buffalo rifle, and about the buckskin bag of dried pemmican and the long-bladed knife which were supported by the man's six-inch-wide belt. In a moment Webb recalled the man. He had met him at Fort Bridger, on a visit to that outpost six months before.

"*Jim Howard!*!" yelled the scout, lowering his arms. "Where in tarnation did you pop up from——"

Jim Howard, who at sixty-one carried his muscular frame as erectly as a young man, kept his rifle muzzle weaving across the three renegades.

"This ain't no time for swappin' amenities, Monte Webb,"

he said without turning his head. "Fork your cayuse an' ride like the devil hisself was after you with a red-hot pitch fork! These skunks have got some pardners comin' our way—chasin' me. When they git here it won't be no tea party!"

Webb lost no time in following the old frontiersman's advice. Reaching out to snatch his Dragoon .44 Colt from the waistband of the red-bearded renegade's trousers, the scout caught his sorrel's reins and vaulted into saddle.

"I'd like to dehorn these polecats," lamented Jim Howard, kneeing his buckskin away from the three cowed outlaws without removing his rifle from shoulder. "But ye can see what we're up agin', comin' yander, Monte—"

Saying they were "up agin' it" was putting it mildly.

Looking up, Monte Webb saw a dozen or more shaggy-jawed renegades tearing recklessly through the trees, steering their horses toward the clearing where Howard had encountered Webb during his own wild flight.

Spurring Starface into a gallop from a standing start, Webb glanced over his shoulder to see Polson stoop and snatch up his fallen Colt six-gun as Jim Howard lowered his gun and reined his mustang about to follow the man he had rescued.

With blurring speed too quick for Webb's eye to follow, Howard's left hand snapped a long-barrelled Paterson .45 from a pommel holster and, firing under his right armpit, drove a heavy slug between Polson's eyes.

Before the renegade's body could hit the ground, Jim Howard had vanished into the chaparral, his buckskin's muzzle only a few feet behind the rump of Webb's sorrel.

A moment later the two men were pounding along the ridge top, stirrup to stirrup, the wind bannering Howard's unkempt beard and whipping at Webb's hat brim.

Behind them, the renegades were plunging in headlong pursuit, westering sun rays glinting off rifle and six-gun barrels as they wove through the rocks and dwarf cedars.

"Howdy, Webb!" yelled Howard, as unconcernedly as if they were chasing a stray cow across a pasture. "What you doin' back here in Idaho, anyway? You connected with that string o' wagons over at the Whetstone River crossin'?"

Webb, crouched low over his saddlehorn to cut wind

resistance, heard a bullet hum over his shoulder and pass Starface's laid-back ears.

"I'm scoutin' 'em to Oregon," Webb yelled back, as they reined sharply to the northward and half slid, half catapulted down a steep hillside toward the shelter of a brushy ravine. "How come you were in the neighbourhood just when I needed help so bad, Howard?"

The old frontiersman swung about in saddle to trigger his Sharps with a thunderous report at the renegades who jammed the skyline behind and above them. Nor did Howard waste ammunition in such spectacular shooting. Before swinging back toward Monte Webb, the grizzled scout had the satisfaction of seeing one of the pursuing renegades hurl up his arms and somersault backward out of saddle.

Not until he and his companion had slammed their way into the dry creek bed which followed the pit of the ravine did Jim Howard explain his providential appearance.

"I'm scoutin' myself, son," the oldster yelled above the pounding of iron-shod hoofs on rubble. "Leadin' a company o' U.S. cavalry down from Fort Hall. We're huntin' Red Kelson's wolf pack—the one that jumped yore wagon train jest now an' choused yore beef stock."

Behind them, sound of pursuit was growing stronger. The dozen or more killers who had been chasing Howard through the cedars were members of the same owlhoot bunch who had attacked Gideon Castle's wagons, Webb knew.

Leaving the ravine and pounding to the top of the next ridge, the two fugitives were forced to draw rein, to give their mounts a chance to regain their wind. Behind them, masked in the dense undergrowth, they could hear the renegades fanning out as they swarmed up out of the ravine.

"These army troops—where are they, Jim?" demanded Webb. "I'd give my eyeteeth to get back the cattle those renegades stole from my wagon train this afternoon. They hazed 'em over toward Shoshone Basin——"

Howard swabbed his perspiring face with a leather sleeve.

"I left them Fort Hall soldiers a good ten mile north o' where Kelson's outfit jumped your wagon train," he explained. "I was doin' the same thing you was, I reckon—tryin' to see where them rustlers were takin' your cattle. Then I runs smack-dab into those skunks the renegades left to cover their

back track. I was hightailin' away from them when I seen you hoorawin' with Red Kelson himself—"

But there was no further time for parley, even though both their mounts were jaded and incapable of much more flight. A roar of guns indicated that the oncoming renegades had spotted them from the brush below, and had chosen to remain in ambush rather than expose themselves.

Grimly, the two fugitives headed their lathered mounts on across a rocky, brushless plateau. Here in the open, against impossible odds, the best they could hope to do would be to locate a boulder nest big enough to hide in. In such a spot they might be able to stand off the renegades until night-fall gave them a chance to make a break for freedom.

They had galloped less than two hundred yards across the boulder-strewn plateau when the renegade riders, led by the cinnamon-bearded killer, who Webb now realized was the notorious Red Kelson himself, appeared in a wide line behind them.

"Their hosses is fresh an' they're comin' loaded fer b'ar," Jim Howard grunted. "Best we kin do is go out fightin', Monte Webb."

And then both riders sawed back on their bridle reins, as they saw destruction looming before them.

Inches in front of their mouths, skidding, hard-braced forelegs yawned a shadow-filled abyss. They had halted on the rimrock of a dry canyon whose rock-fanged pit was a good thirty feet below them!

Webb and Howard gauged the width of the abyss. It ranged from twenty to sixty yards across. And the cliffs offered no broken ledges down which even a mountain goat could climb.

Automatically the two men swung out of saddles, peering across their horses' backs at the oncoming outlaws.

Realizing that they had their quarry cut off from further flight, Red Kelson and his murderous crew had slowed their horses to a walk. Now it was merely a matter of drawing into gun range and finishing their slaughter.

Monte Webb's face was drawn with fatigue as he hauled his Spencer rifle from scabbard. He turned, ducking under Starface's neck to face Jim Howard. The game-hearted old frontiersman thrust out a calloused hand.

"I took a likin' to ye last fall when you was at Fort Bridger, son," the old man said. "I reckon I couldn't 've picked anybody to die with that'd suit me any better. But that's mighty pore consolation in a moment like this un, ain't it?"

He jerked back as a rifle bullet whistled through space between them.

Then Howard and Webb dropped to their knees, aiming their rifles under their horses' bellies, each of them picking out a target. This showdown was doomed to be a brief one, but as Jim Howard had said, they would go out fighting.

Even as Monte Webb saw the renegades dismounting to throw themselves flat behind sheltering rocks, an idea flashed into the scout's brain.

"We haven't got a chance, Jim," he said quickly, "so I vote we leave our horses an' take to the canyon here!"

Howard's buffalo rifle thundered, and out on the rocky plateau there sounded a high-pitched, gagging yell of agony, as a bullet-drilled renegade dropped kicking in the act of making a dash from one boulder to another.

Fanning gun smoke away from his eyes, the frontiersman looked up to see that Monte Webb was unbuckling a coiled lariat from his saddle pommel. Dallying one end of the rope around his saddlehorn, the scout shook out the coils and hurled the rope out over the rim of the canyon.

"Even bein' afoot down in that gulch will be better than bein' picked off like coyotes up here, Jim!" Webb declared. "Doesn't that make sense to you?"

For answer, Howard got to his feet, unbuckled a saddle pouch, and helped himself to a handful of ammunition.

"What we waitin' fer, son?" he asked. "You slide down first, an' duck when you git to the bottom o' that rope, because I'll be right on top o' ye!"

Clamping his Spencer under an armpit, Webb swung his legs over the rimrock's brink, got a tight grip on his rope, wound one buckskin-clad leg about the rope to serve as a brake, and swung off into space.

Starface braced his legs under the weight tugging at the saddlehorn, and his whicker seemed almost like a human's farewell, as if the sorrel sensed the fact that he might never see his master again.

The rope burned the flesh of Webb's palm as he slid as

rapidly as he could with safety, toward the brush-choked pit of the gorge.

When he came to the end of the thirty-foot rope, he found himself dangling in mid-air above the canyon bottom. He let go, plummeted a dozen feet through space and sprawled safely on to a cushioning hedge of flowering aspen.

Almost before Webb could roll out of the way, Jim Howard came scooting down the rope like an overgrown monkey and crashed into the aspen growth.

Then both men crawled side by side down the last steep pitch of talus gravel, to find themselves hidden from view of their foe by the ten-foot buckbrush and stunted pine growth.

"By the old Harry, son, we fooled them devils that time!" chuckled Howard, pulling brambles out of his tangled whiskers. "Now the fun commences. It'll be like poppin' bottles offn a row o' fence posts when Kelson's bunch git to the rim."

Bare seconds later, the two men caught sight of a row of heads peering over the rimrock forty feet above. When the sunlight picked out Red Kelson's waving mattress of cinnamon whiskers Jim Howard lifted his Paterson six-gun to take steady aim at the leader of the outlaw horde which had been terrorizing the Oregon Trail traffic for years.

"Watch out, men!" came Kelson's warning to his men. "We don't dare slide down this rope o' theirs or —"

Brrrang! Even as Howard pulled trigger, he and Webb scuttled to one side, so that the spout of white gun smoke would not betray their position to the outlaws lining the rimrock. Webb's heart leaped with excitement as he saw Red Kelson's body swaying against the blue skyline. The renegade was clawing dazedly at his whiskers. Then, before his nearest henchman could grab his toppling body, Kelson pitched like a hewn tree over the brink and his body hurtled down, to shatter flesh and bone on the rocks below.

"We'd better be makin' tracks out o' here, son!" decided Howard, as a quick survey of the cliff brink above them revealed no more targets. "They'll be rakin' this brush with hot lead, any minute now. Them varmints have been honin' to collect my h'ar for goin' on three y'ars now."

Getting to their feet, the scouts pushed off through the brush, heading up the canyon bend to the northward. As

they rounded a bend in the gorge, they were confronted by a hundred yards of open space where no brush grew.

"We better git acrost to that other brush, afore it's too late," warned Howard. "We'd be easy to pick off crossin' that open—"

Whining! A bullet traced a bluish, leaden smear across a rock at Howard's feet, as the two fugitives started out into the open.

They ducked back into the brush, eyes spotting a thin smudge of gun smoke purling out of a wild rosebush on the canyon rim. But of the gunman they saw no trace.

"No use invitin' suicide," said Howard, his voice for the first time revealing his inner alarm. "Nothin' to do but go back an' try our luck to the southward."

Retracing their steps, the pair were chased through the brush by a fusilade of shots that forced them to burrow into the undergrowth and lie still. The shaking of a thicket top might well bring a fatal hail of slugs.

Voices could be heard from the rimrock, the speakers remaining out of sight as they debated the advisability of making their way down into the canyon to smoke their prey from cover.

Wriggling on through the dead grass and brush, branches lashing their heads and shoulders, the two scouts penetrated the dry gorge to a point fifty yards beyond the spot where they had passed Red Kelson's mangled corpse.

"It's no use, Jim—we're trapped!" The words were wrenching from Webb as he and his companion found themselves faced by another open, sandy stretch, hemmed in by beetling granite walls and floored with rubble which offered no possible hiding place from enemy fire. There was despair in the faces of both men as they realized that they were trapped, at least until nightfall, in a stretch of brush less than a hundred yards in length.

Then, from directly overhead, came a derisive yell:

"You ain't gettin' out o' this tight, Jim Howard! We'll smoke you an' your pard out o' there mighty soon!"

Howard put his lips close to Webb's ear.

"We're in for hell, Monte," he whispered. "That voice belonged to a breed named Canuck Farber—a pizen-mean breed, an' take my word fer that. He's been honin' to kill

me since I kicked him out o' the post two years ago for stealin' pelts, an' he j'ined up with Red Kelson's guerrillas. Farber's swore to get my scalp ever since, an' if we don't git out o' this canyon afore moonrise, he'll stand a good chance to——"

Howard ceased whispering as he caught sight of a renegade skulking along the rimrock directly above the south edge of the brushy strip. Before the oldster could get his Sharps levelled, he saw the outlaw lean over the cliff brink and drop something down into the chasm.

A streak of red, and then a mounting column of smoke told Webb and Howard the nature of the object, even as it struck the dry brush in a shower of sparks.

The outlaw had dropped a flaming bundle of dry weeds and sticks over the cliff brink!

Even as the renegade ducked out of sight, there came to the ears of the two scouts the ominous crackle of flames, as the breeze which moved through the canyon fanned the smouldering bundle of tinder-dry grass and faggots into leaping flame.

"Devil take them, they're aimin' to burn us out o' hyar!" growled Howard, digging steely fingers into Webb's arm.

"Now there's nothin' we *kin* do but leg it toward the north!"

A few yards ahead of them, a livid wall of pink flame was biting into the dry grass and underbrush. Sparks, flying on the wind over their heads, started hundreds of smaller fires in the foliage above and beyond them.

The two scouts crouched low and started to race through the canyon, smoke already beginning to clog their nostrils.

And then, midway along the brushy canyon bottom and almost at the exact spot where they had slid down the rope to what they felt was the security of the rock-walled corridor, Webb and Howard came to a halt.

Ahead of them, the underbrush was a roaring inferno, from ignited bundles of grass and weeds which the renegades had thrown over the rimrock at a dozen points.

In another moment the entire length of the strip of underbrush was raging into a blazing holocaust!

Above the crackle of flames, the voice of Canuck Farber drifted down:

"Stay in thar an' roast, blast you! Or run out o' the brush an' taste some hot lead on yore way to hell!"

CHAPTER 15

June Castle's Decision

Linking hands as they stumbled on through furnace-like heat the two frontier scouts fought their way through blazing twigs, while raw fire licked at their buckskin-clad legs from the grass which conveyed the fire along the ground with a rapidity exceeded only by the flames which the wind swept along the brush tops.

The roar of the conflagration was deafening now, amplified by the natural sounding boards formed by the overhanging granite cliffs.

"Jim, we got to run for it!" Webb cried. "There isn't a chance that we'll get away from them renegades when we bust into the open. But even a bullet in the head would be better than roastin' to death!"

Howard nodded, his face soot-smeared, his eyes glinting with a defiance that made Webb's heart leap with admiration.

"Looks like we play out our strings together, Monte," the old man growled. "So let's go!"

Shoulder to shoulder, the doomed men fought their way toward the edge of the brush. Cinders and sparks showered their backs. Like a pack of scarlet wolves, the flames, urged on by a tail wind, leaped to overtake them.

Even as they broke into the clearing, Howard and Webb drew Colt six-guns from holsters, determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible.

Through plunging smoke, they peered upward at the rimrock, saw it lined with Canuck Farber's men, rifles ready, faces lighted with fiendish anticipation as they caught sight of their quarry emerging from the burning brush. And then, as the trapped pair dropped to their knees to take aim through the coiling smoke clouds, a strange thing happened.

Voicing hoarse shouts which were muffled by the roar of the flames, Farber and his renegades suddenly turned away from the rimrock, vanishing from sight.

"It's a trick!" yelled Jim Howard. "But come on. We might as well run while we kin!"

Out of the smoke and down the open, unprotected pit of the canyon the two made their way, muscles braced against the expected shock of ambush bullets. Then, to their numbed ears, came the sound of guns blasting up beyond the skyline.

A moment later, mounted horsemen appeared on the rim of the cliff, peering down into the raging inferno below.

Jim Howard whipped up his Colt, only to have Monte Webb leap upon him and pull his gun arm down before he could draw bead on the whiskered leader of the horsemen.

"Don't shoot Jim!" yelled Monte Webb, his voice ringing with relief. "They're not renegades; they're my own men from the wagon train!"

It was true. As Webb ran to the base of the cliff, he saw Gideon Castle leap off his horse to kneel on the rimrock and wave his arm in greeting.

"You all right, Webb?" came the Missourian's shout, faintly audible above the crescendo of the cheated flames.

"We're all right, Gid. Toss us down a rope; we're kind of anxious to get out of this bake oven!"

Castle withdrew from sight, as Jim Howard, slowly holstering his Colt, walked over to Webb's side.

"Your pards showed up in the nick o' time," the frontiersman grinned. "Doggoned if I was ever in a tighter spot."

A rope dangled down to meet their stretching arms, and the two scouts got firm grip on the heavy, pleated rawhide. Then, pulled up the face of the low scarp by Castle's powerful saddle horse, the two found themselves hauled over the rimrock by eager hands.

"We figgered mebbe those raiders had chased you down here, when we seen 'em squattin' like vultures lookin' at that burnin' bresh!" said Castle, pumping the scout's arm. He jerked a thumb toward Jim Howard, who was faced by a battery of hostile eyes. "Who's this old goat? One o' the raiders, Monte?"

Webb laughed, and introduced Howard to the twenty-odd men from the wagon train. His name brought looks of astonishment and respect, for it was well known throughout the West.

Far to the south, Webb saw Canuck Farber and his com-

panions spurring in wild escape, followed by a score or more of Castle Missourians bent on meting out at least partial vengeance for the raid on their wagon train.

When the commotion following the rescue of the two men had subsided, and Webb had described the events between the time he had left the wagon train and the present moment, Jim Howard picked out a sturdy-looking boy in his early teens.

"Son, you ride over to Whetstone River an' foller it about ten miles north o' the Oregon Trail until you come to a squad o' Fort Hall cavalrymen camped thar," instructed the scout. "I was guidin' 'em down here, hopin' to locate them raiders who jumped your wagons this afternoon. Tell 'em Jim Howard sent you, an' to head south as soon as daylight comes tomorrow. I reckon them soldiers will git your live-stock back for ye."

The boy glanced at Gideon Castle for approval and, receiving the Missourian's nod, spurred away on his mission.

Willing riders galloped out on the rocky plateau to round up the horses of Webb and Howard, which had been left behind by the renegades in their desperate flight. Soon the cavalcade was headed back toward the wagon train, Jim Howard regaling the Missourians with his inexhaustible fund of tall stories. Castle and Webb, with more serious business to discuss, had dropped to the rear.

Darkness overtook them a mile or so from the wagons before Monte reluctantly brought up a topic he had dreaded to mention.

"Got the dead an' wounded counted yet, Gid?"

Castle nodded, his eyes bitter.

"Twenty-one folks to bury tonight, Webb."

The scout's face was bleak. This would go down in history as one of the Oregon Trail's major disasters.

"Eight of the dead are kids, and four womenfolks," Castle went on, his face bleak in the gathering darkness. "Ten more were wounded, an' one or two o' them may die before mornin'. Ross Flagg got a slug in his hip that Doc Perry had to dig out. Too dang bad the slug didn't— But I reckon that ain't no way for a Christian man to be talkin'."

They rode on in silence, listening absent-mindedly to Jim Howard's thrilling account of an adventure in which

he, single-handed, had surrounded a tribe of warring Flathead Indians and annihilated them.

"June an' your wife are all right, though, aren't they?" Webb asked presently.

"Fit as fiddles . . . Webb, son, you told me this afternoon afore all this ruckus started that you care for my daughter. That right?"

The young trail guide nodded. "I do care for her," he admitted. "But—"

"Then why don't you tell her so?" demanded Gideon Castle. "How's she to know, if you don't open your trap about it?"

Webb looked uncomfortable. Then words came, in a rush: "I—well, I—hang it, Gid, I will tell her. If she's still up when I get back to the wagons tonight, I'll tell her then! Maybe I have got a chance, even against a handsome slicker like Ross Flagg."

An approving chuckle issued from Castle's beard.

"And she'll accept you, too, son!" he boomed. "You see if she won't!"

An hour later, as the returning riders were hailing the sentinels posted around the familiar circle of wagons, Gideon Castle reined alongside Webb's stirrup and pointed to a small canvas tent pitched next to Castle's three wagons. Inside the tent, lantern light glowed, and shadows showed on the canvas walls.

"That's the missus an' June in there. They've prob'ly been carin' for some o' the wounded," said the wagon captain. "Let's go in an' get this business over with, Monte. I'll get my wife out o' there, so you can talk to June in private."

As they walked up to the tent, Monte: Webb felt his heart flood with misgivings. Had it not been for Castle's firm arm linked through his own, the scout knew he would have bolted like a skittery mule at sight of a rattlesnake.

"Ma! June!" called out Gideon Castle, as they halted before the tent door. "You folks dressed?"

"Come in, dad!" Mrs. Castle called. "Thank God you're back. Did you find Mon---"

Her voice broke off, as her husband and the buckskin-garbed scout ducked through the tent fly.

Seated on a cot at one end of the tent was Ross Flagg, his

bandaged leg stretched out on the cot as he sat there, one arm about June Castle's waist. Mrs. Castle was hovering over a folding table stacked with bandages and a medicine chest.

"We've been worrying about you, Monte," said Mrs. Castle with a motherly smile. "Where'd you find him, dad?"

Gideon Castle cleared his throat awkwardly, and nudged Webb in the back.

"Monte's got somethin' powerful important to say," blurted the old man. "He's got somethin' to tell you, June, so maybe if you could step outside with him for a minute——"

Ross Flagg's dark brows gathered in a suspicious frown, as he glared at Monte Webb. The scout, flushed with confusion, was twisting his hat brim around in his fingers.

"And we've got something important to tell you, too," June said. "News both you and daddy will be glad to hear, Monte. We——"

"Yes," put in Ross Flagg, wincing as he moved his wounded leg. "Before we put out for Fort Hall in the morning, Gid, there's going to be a wedding here on the Oregon Trail!"

Webb stiffened, and he saw the sudden grim expression that came over Castle's face.

"A . . . weddin'?" repeated the scout, his voice sounding strangely far off in his own ears. "Whose wedding?"

"Ours, Monte," June said, smiling at Flagg. "Ross' and mine. After almost losing my future husband in that fight today, I decided we shouldn't postpone our marriage any longer. We're going to be married tomorrow!"

CHAPTER 16

Oregon Trail Wedding

The Idaho sun dawned over the Rocky Mountain crags to find the Missouri wagon train abustle with activity.

Death's black wings had beaten over the hoods of the prairie schooners the day before, and funeral services had been held in the twilight, where a long row of mounds had been dug overlooking the waters of Whetstone River. During the night two more men had passed away, from wounds inflicted by renegade bullets; but this new tragedy was nullified by happier news—news that had put the caravan's women-folk busy rummaging through horsehide trunks, to dig out hoop skirts and fresh bonnets which had been untouched since leaving Missouri months before.

For this day was a day set apart, a day not to be shadowed by any hint of tragedy.

This was June Castle's wedding day!

The news had travelled from wagon to wagon, from family to family, almost before the camp bugler had sounded reveille to start the day's activities.

Weddings were nothing to the Oregon Trail, but the wedding of June Castle, the belle of the caravan, would go down in the annals of the overland trails as something quite apart from other weddings. The women and the young people in the caravan would see to that.

Young men had been at work before daylight, chopping down saplings and constructing a bower a short distance from the Castle tent. The bower was now being festooned with wild roses, flowering sumac and purple blooms of the thistle poppy. Under it, the marriage vows of June Castle and Ross Flagg would be exchanged.

Sky Pilot Wardle, a Methodist minister who had been to Oregon previously as a missionary, and whose services had been required at many an unmarked graveside along the Trail, was to officiate on this happier occasion.

Shortly after the hasty breakfasts had been consumed and

the caravan doctor had begun his rounds of the persons wounded during the previous day's mêlée, an interruption occurred in the arrival of a sizable body of United States cavalry, following Whetstone River southward.

They were met at the camp by Jim Howard, their official scout, who acquainted the captain in charge of the troops with the fact that Red Kelson's notorious band of Oregon Trail ambushers would be found, driving the Missourians' stolen cattle, somewhere within the limits of Shoshone Basin.

Given a rousing send-off by the people of the wagons, the troops galloped away to the south with the Stars and Stripes bannering gloriously in the wind, and sunlight glinting dramatically off sabre hilts and saddle trappings.

Jim Howard, mounted on a restive gelding belonging to Gideon Castle's string of saddle horses, broke away from the departing troops as he caught sight of Monte Webb emerging from the nearby bottomland of Whetstone River, trailing a pack horse loaded with freshly chopped firewood.

"You look as glum as a pullet in a rooster pen, Monte!" chided the old man, drawing rein alongside the scout's horse. "Ain't you j'inin' your neighbours in celebratin' this here weddin' that's comin' off?"

Webb forced himself to grin.

"There's work to do, wedding or not," he answered. "Well, I'm wishin' you an' the soldiers good luck in cleanin' out those outlaws an' gettin' Castle's beef critters back. It means a heap to these settlers——"

Howard shaved a chunk of tobacco from the black plug, sheathed his long-bladed bowie, and tucked the chew into his check. Then, fixing Webb appraisingly with a spark-blue eye, the frontiersman drawled:

"You ain't in no humour for talkin' this mornin', I kin see that. You wanted to marry this Castle gal yourself, didn't you, son?"

Webb made no reply, but Howard knew his words had struck home.

"No use lyin' about it," Howard went on. "Gid Castle told me the story, an' what happened when you went into their tent last night, all primed to pop the question. Why, when I was congratulatin' the groom this mornin', I sez to myself, I sez, 'Jim,' I sez, 'this Ross Flagg's a rat an' a

no-good, hydrophobia coyote. What a gal like this June Castle kin see in him is beyond me. Now,' I sez, 'whyn't she pick herself a young hellion like Monte Webb to tame and curry? ' "

Webb yanked at the hackamore of the pack horse and spurred his mount forward, his face white-lipped and tense.

" So long, Jim—see you at Fort Hall," he called over his shoulder. " I'd give my eyeteeth to go with you after them raiders, but June'd think I wasn't a good-enough sport to see her get hitched to that brass-buttoned skunk."

Jim Howard gathered up his reins, sparks of humour glinting in his eyes. Then, rowelling his borrowed pony into a long lope, he headed off in the direction taken by the cavalry-men.

For Monte Webb, the rest of the morning was a nightmare of suspense. He avoided getting near the wedding-bower, for fear he might run into one of the Castles, or Ross Flagg.

Finally, as the sun reached the noon position in the cloudless heavens, the bugles sounded an assembly call and the hundreds of emigrants, all of them decked out in their best clothing, grouped themselves in front of the flower-decked bower where the minister waited, his bald head gleaming in the hot sunlight.

Inside the Castles' tent, June was being fussed over by her teary-eyed mother and the young woman who would be bridesmaid at the forthcoming ceremony. Gideon Castle, looking uncomfortable in high beaver hat and black frock coat and polished boots, was fidgeting nervously some distance from the bower, in front of the buzzing crowd. The musicians, ready with banjos and fiddles and a wheezy concertina, were poised near the wagons to commence the wedding march.

Under other circumstances, Monte Webb would have found the marriage rites colourful and dramatic, out here under the enamel-blue vault of the Idaho sky, with the wonders of God's Western wonderland spread to all points of the compass in lieu of a cathedral's stained-glass windows and glowing altar candles. Instead, however, the buckskin-clad scout found himself watching the proceedings from between two of the covered wagons, unnoticed and alone, his brain a turmoil of conflicting emotions. The certainty that June was marrying a killer and that he, Monte Webb, could do

nothing to prevent the wedding, tore at him like a sharp-edged knife.

The musicians, on a signal from the minister, struck up a wedding march after Ross Flagg's arrival at the bower. The groom-to-be was resplendent in his full regimentals—golden epaulettes, a row of badges won on battlefields from Bull Run to Atlanta, his sabre hilt polished until it shone like liquid fire in the sun's rays.

All eyes were riveted to the drawn flies of June Castle's tent, from which the bride would step forth into the blazing sunshine with her bouquet of wild prairie flowers, wearing the wedding gown which had been her mother's and her grandmother's before her.

But minutes passed, and the girl made no appearance from the tent.

"Maybe she's waitin' to come out on the arm of her father, Gid!" called the minister. "Go take a look-see an' find out what's delayin' the ceremony!"

Gideon Castle, moving with an almost springy step, ducked under the bower and made his way to the tent. He called to his wife and daughter, but received no answer. Then the assembled multitude saw him duck inside the tent, and a muffled buzz of conversation swept over the throng.

The next moment Castle bounded from the tent as if shot from a cannon, his high beaver hat tumbling off his head to roll in the dust.

"There's the devil to pay, folks!" yelled the old wagon captain, his voice carrying to the outermost edge of the crowd. "My wife an' the bridesmaid are bound an' gagged, an' June ain't in the tent at all! She's been kidnapped!"

In the wild confusion which followed Gideon Castle's shout, Ross Flagg and Monte Webb were the only ones to race toward the tent into which Castle had ducked again. Flagg, limping because of his wounded hip, reached the tent several seconds after Monte Webb had whipped aside the canvas flies.

The two men saw Gideon Castle busy untying the knots of a towel which had been wrapped around Mrs. Castle's mouth as a gag. She was seated on the cot where Webb had seen Flagg the night before, and beside her was a young woman, the bridesmaid, similarly gagged.

Both women were heavily bound hand and foot with picket ropes, and both were wide-eyed with terror.

Of June Castle there was no trace, except her bridal bouquet of wild flowers, trampled under Gideon Castle's feet as the old man struggled desperately with the knotted gag.

Webb, pushing into the tent with Flagg at his shoulder, saw that the rear of the tent, a foot or so away from the box of the nearest wagon, had been slit from top to bottom with some sharp instrument. That hole in the tent undoubtedly, had been cut by the kidnapper, and marked the avenue of his getaway with June Castle.

The whole thing was fantastic, incredible, something out of a lurid novel or a nightmare. But Mrs. Castle gave credence to the scene when her whiskered husband had finally succeeded in ripping off her gag.

"One of those terrible renegades kidnapped her!" the woman screamed hysterically. "We were fixing her hair, and this big outlaw came in, slashing a hole in the tent with a long butcher knife——"

"Who done it, ma? Who was it?" cried Castle, illogically, shaking his wife to prevent her from fainting. "When did it happen?"

Mrs. Castle sobbed brokenly, pouring out her story in a hysterical rush: "About ten minutes ago. This renegade came in and we couldn't even cry out, because he pointed a big pistol at us. He gagged Florence and me, and tied us up—and tied up June, too——"

Monte Webb, leaping forward with a bowie knife, cut the bonds which held Mrs. Castle's arms behind her back. Gideon Castle, apparently overcome with grief and shock, appeared incapable of thinking about his wife's bonds.

"The renegade wore a gunny sack over his head for a mask," Mrs. Castle went on. "And he slipped out with June without anybody seeing him——"

Webb waited for no more. He vaulted the army cot and pushed through the slashed opening in the back of the tent, searching the ground between the tent and Castle's wagon for some trace of the kidnapper's escape.

Moccasin prints, not unlike an Indian's, led away through the dust, showing Webb where the man had carried June away between the wagons.

Convinced that there were no other clues, Webb raced off to the picketed horses inside the corral of wagons. With feverish haste he selected a fast roan and saddled it up.

He was leading the horse back to the spot where he had left the kidnapper's trail when Ross Flagg came climbing over a wagon tongue, a saddle hoisted aboard one shoulder.

"We've got to find her, Webb!" cried the army man, desperation in his voice. "Wait for me."

Five minutes later, Monte Webb and Ross Flagg, each in saddle, were reining up outside the circle of wagons to talk to Gideon Castle.

June's father, alone out of the mob of men who were milling about the tent, had had the presence of mind to hunt out the kidnapper's tracks in the dust and follow them to the spot where the moccasin prints ended in a hodge-podge of steel-shod hoofs.

"The kidnapper had his horse waitin' here, an' he headed for the river!" said Webb, pointing to the tracks which led off through the dirt in the direction of the Whetstone bottom-lands. "Flagg and me can handle this by ourselves, Gid. It'd just complicate matters to bring along a big posse."

Without further parley, the two riders spurred into a gallop, following the kidnapper's trail until it dipped down a break in the shale banks to reach the muddy rim of the river. There, to Webb's relief, the trail turned southward, instead of plunging into the river water where trailing might be made difficult or outright impossible.

Riding at top speed, Flagg and Webb sent their horses rocketing down the river-bank trail following the kidnapper's spoor through dwarf cottonwood and willow brake, galloping recklessly along rocky ledges, oblivious of whipping branches. Then, with an unexpectedness which made both riders saw back desperately on the reins, they reached the end of the hunt.

Standing calmly in the shade of a cottonwood overhanging the trail was a lathered horse, with June Castle seated in the saddle. Her hands untied, the girl was rearranging her hair!

Standing alongside the horse's muzzle was a towering figure in buckskins, his head covered with a gunny-sack mask fitted with twin eye holes and held in place by a coon-skin cap.

Aside from a towel draped about her neck which obviously

had been a gag to prevent her making an outcry, June Castle showed no signs of bodily injury. Her white wedding gown was shredded by brambles and smeared with dust, but her face displayed no expression of fear.

With blurring speed, the two men snatched guns from holsters and dismounted, racing forward to cover the silent kidnapper.

"Thank God!" cried Flagg, as June Castle slid from the saddle into his arms. "Are you hurt, dear?"

The girl's angry eyes focused on Monte Webb.

"You can drop this masquerade, Monte!" she said, noting that the scout's gun still covered the kidnapper. "Ross, this whole kidnapping is a hoax!"

Webb's jaw sagged open in amazement. From behind the kidnapper's burlap mask issued an unmistakable chuckle.

"A hoax!" repeated the girl in a brittle voice. "My so-called kidnapper here said we'd stop and wait. He said that Monte Webb would be along sooner or later. That proves he's some friend of Webb's——"

Monte Webb, keeping his Dragoon .44 thrust hard against the kidnapper's midriff, reached out and pulled the gunny-sack mask from the man's head.

Revealed under the mask was the whiskery, sheepish-eyed face of Jim Howard!

"Don't start cussin' me, naow, Monte!" protested the old frontiersman as Webb holstered his Colt. "After all, I was doin' ye an' the gal a favour. I kept her from marryin' this soldier dude, didn't I?"

Monte Webb, his face grey with embarrassment, turned to face June Castle. In her eyes he saw only scorn and contempt for him. Ross Flagg's twisting face, however, was mottled with rage, his throat working as if to speak words that would not come.

"So you planned this whole thing, Monte!" June cried scornfully. "You . . . you hired this uncouth wretch to kidnap me. I'll never forgive you!"

With a grating oath, Ross Flagg swept his bride-to-be into his arms and strode back to place her aboard his horse.

Webb and Howard stared after them, as the uniformed groom mounted behind the girl, his face now drained white with rage.

"I'm going to kill you for this, Webb!" said Flagg, his voice ominously calm and controlled. "As soon as we get this wedding over with, I'm setting out to kill you. You'd better skip the country, Webb—because when I lay eyes on you again, I shoot to kill!"

Wheeling his horse, he headed back up the river-bank trail at a gallop, to vanish in the brush.

"Waal, now, if that ain't gratitude' for ye!" snorted Howard, squirting a jet of tobacco juice over his shoulder. "Here I loant that gal my assistance in—"

He gulped, inadvertently swallowing his quid of tobacco, as Monte Webb wheeled about to face him.

"If you weren't twice my age, I'd give you the worst beating a man ever got!" raged the scout. "Of all the bungling idiots! Of all the fool, crazy, ornery—"

Jim Howard turned injured eyes upon his friend.

"Hod dang it, I ain't the idjut you want," he protested. "Gid Castle thunk up the idee—I jest carried it out! Gid didn't hanker for his daughter to marry that skunk no more'n you did!"

Webb shrugged helplessly and returned to his horse.

CHAPTER 17

Castle Brings a Warning

Feeling more reluctant than ever to witness June Castle's belated wedding, Monte Webb accepted Howard's suggestion that he ride south after the Fort Hall soldiers who were pursuing the raiders into Shoshone Basin.

Keeping himself stonily aloof from the talkative old guide, Webb took little interest in the rest of the day, even though it was crowned with a success that meant a great deal to him and even more to the emigrants of the wagon train.

For several hours, they rode without seeing the cavalrymen. Then, at mid-afternoon, the two scouts topped the north rim of Shoshone Basin and saw, approaching them across the grasslands, a herd of Missouri beef cattle. But the stolen animals were no longer being herded by members of Red Kelson's renegade gang. They were accompanied by the Fort Hall troops, serving as drovers instead of cavalrymen!

In the advance of the herd rode a group of forty or more heavily bound prisoners, among them Canuck Farber and several outlaws whom Howard and Webb recognized as members of the group who had sought to burn them out of the canyon the evening before.

"A total rout, Jim," the commander of the troops reported, "when the scouts rode down into the basin to greet the returning soldiers and the cattle herd. "We surprised Kelson's men hazing these stolen cattle through the gap in the south rim of the basin. Those that didn't give up were left for the wolves to gnaw."

Thus it was, at sunset, that the members of Gideon Castle's wagon caravan were treated to the happy spectacle of seeing their cattle herd returned to them with only a negligible percentage of loss as a result of the raid.

With glad shouts, the wagoners and their families welcomed the cavalry riders to their supper tables, seeking to repay the troops as best they could for the restoration of their property.

Monte Webb, dreading the prospect of continuing the trek to Oregon after the wedding fiasco, sought to remain with the cavalry riders in their camp outside the circle of wagons. But shortly after sundown, as he was picketing his sorrel in lush bluestem down in the Whetstone bottom-lands, he saw Gideon Castle approaching him on horseback.

"Where in tarnation have you been all evenin', son?" yelled the old Missourian. "I been lookin' all over creation for ye. I got a hull passel o' news, Monte—some good, some bad."

The leader of the wagon train drew rein, grinning down at the scout benevolently.

"Well, I reckon you're Ross Flagg's father-in-law by now," muttered Webb. "I suppose I ought to grin and congratulate you."

Gideon Castle laughed uproariously.

"So that's why you run off an' holed up this evenin', eh? Figgered Ross Flagg an' June got hitched when they got back from the kidnappin' party, eh?"

"Well, son," the wagon captain said with an abrupt change of demeanour, "June didn't get married today. She postponed the weddin'."

"Postponed the wedding?" Webb repeated the words in a dazed monotone.

Gideon Castle grinned expansively, worried off a chew of green Missouri tobacco twist, and nodded.

"Yep. 'Twere my cookin' up that kidnappin' stunt with Jim Howard that done the trick, Monte. When June found out you didn't have anything to do with that kidnappin', she starts cryin'—an' that were a good sign, Monte. Waal, I figgered the time was ripe to tell her how you feel about her, so I did."

Monte Webb started, his pulse racing.

"What'd she say to that, Gid?"

Castle shrugged.

"Nothin'—because just then, Ross Flagg comes into the tent, sayin', 'Honey, the preacher's waitin', an' all the people.' She doesn't look up, but says, 'can't git married today, Ross. I'm too upset.'"

"Well," Castle went on, "Flagg says to her, 'All right, June. I can wait until tomorrow for the wedding.' And

then my daughter—bless her little heart—she looks around and says, 'Ross, I'm too mixed up now to talk, but I'm pretty sure of one thing—that I don't really love you. At least, not enough to marry you. I don't want to marry anybody—ever.'"

Webb swallowed hard, his bronzed face twitching with an emotion he was glad the gathering dusk hid from the old man. "I reckon Flagg was mighty sore," he said.

Gideon Castle dismounted. In the dusk, Webb saw that the old man's hilarity had vanished, giving way to an expression of deep gravity as he gripped Webb's shoulder.

"That's the bad news I come out to tell you, Monte. Ross Flagg's no fool. He knows danged well—even if you don't—that my girl's heart belongs to you. Leastwise, Flagg's filled his belly with hard liquor, an' he's packin' a pair o' six-guns. He's swore to kill you on sight, Monte."

Webb filled his lungs deeply, hitched his gun belt.

"Thanks for warnin' me about him, Gid. Just to keep from havin' a showdown tonight, with everybody around, I won't come back to camp till Flagg's turned in for the night. But whenever he wants to have it out with me, I'll be ready."

Castle nodded.

"Good night, son. Just remember to keep your eyes peeled for trouble whenever Flagg's around, the next few days."

After Castle had ridden back across the bottomlands and had vanished over the star-dot'd skyline toward the wagons, Webb headed for the river, a strange exhilaration coursing through his tired body.

The delayed wedding, he knew, would be a prime excuse for Ross Flagg to engineer a duel betw'en them. Not did he doubt that the man would attempt murder from ambush, if the opportunity offered itself.

Reaching the moonlit river, Webb unbuckled his gun belt and proceeded to strip off his buckskin jacket and trousers.

His muscled, lithe body gleaming in the faint wash of moon and starlight, the scout walked to an overhanging bank, poised there a moment, and then dived off into the cool, refreshing waters of the Whetstone.

A ten minute swim in the icy stream brought with it a release of tension from the gruelling rigours of the days just

past, and as he crawled back on to the bank at the spot where he had left his clothing, Webb felt renewed strength pumping through nerves and sinews that had been jaded to the breaking point before.

And then, in the act of scrambling up on to the grassy ledge, Monte Webb stiffened. Standing spread-legged above the mound of buckskin clothing was a tall figure silhouetted against the night sky.

Moonlight showed the man's teeth bared in a snarl and glinted along the barrels of two Colt .45 army six-guns which were levelled at Webb's naked chest.

"I've waited quite awhile for a showdown with you, Webb!" rasped the gunman. "Stand up, you dirty polecat—and eat lead!"

Faced by a double gun drop at point-blank range, Monte Webb knew he was doomed, even as he recognized the murderer's voice as being that of Ross Flagg. Unarmed, beyond earshot of the camp on the plains above the river, Webb knew that the end had come.

Like a cat toying with a helpless mouse, Ross Flagg hefted his six-guns carelessly, stepping over Monte Webb's pile of clothing and gun harness to squat down, .45 muzzles just beyond reach of the crouching trail scout on the river bank.

But Webb had no intention of trying a suicidal reach for the guns. He was calculating his chances of leaping backward into the shallow water, before Flagg could flex his trigger fingers.

But the army man, his face flushed with whisky, chose to do some talking before he blasted his enemy into eternity.

"Less'n an hour ago, I had a talk with June, Webb," he confided with a wicked grin. "She'd never seen me drunk before. She lost her temper—an' loosened her tongue. She gave you your death sentence, Webb, by the talkin' she done."

Monte Webb's fingers dug into the grass roots, working his toes into the loose soil to get purchase for a desperate sidewise leap that might, by some miracle, carry him out from under Flagg's gun drop. In the meantime, if he could stall for precious time, keep Flagg's mind busy—

"Meanin' what?" he demanded. "How could June give me a death sentence?"

Flagg's white, fanglike teeth were bared in a snarl.

"She told me she was turnin' me down in favour o' you, Webb, if you'd have her. Right then I buckled on these guns an' swore to kill you on sight. I hunted everywhere—and now I've found you. But if you think I'm going to finish you off quick, with a slug in the heart, you're mistaken."

Flagg laughed with fiendish abandon, thumbs poised on knurled gun hammers. His eyes held a madman's fixed gleam.

"I'm going to gut-shot you, Webb." The army man's voice was strained, choked. "You're going to wallow there in the mud and beg me to finish you off like I would a horse with a broken leg. Maybe, after a while, I will. And then I'll bring June down here to see you. And while she's looking at you, I'll put a slug through that beautiful head of hers."

Monte Webb had heard the insane, hysterical outbursts of drunken men before. He knew that Ross Flagg's broken pride and long-standing hatred were now lashed to the fever pitch by the liquor burning within him.

"You'll put your neck in a rope by killing me and June, Flagg," Webb warned him coolly. "You couldn't get away with it. You——"

Without warning, the scout flung his body flat on the sloping bank and rolled sidewise.

Instantly the Colt .45s in Flagg's hands blazed in unison, the bullets tunnelling space inches above Webb's rolling form and chugging into the river to form twin geysers of spray.

Webb leaped to his feet and plunged out into the river. At the same moment Flagg leaped erect, throwing his guns down in chopping motions as he triggered them in a wild frenzy.

As Webb dived into the shallow water, he felt one of Flagg's slugs rip through the flesh of his left thigh, paralyzing him with agony. Another slug spat the water inches from his head and ricocheted off into the night.

Fighting for consciousness, the scout swam out into the deep channel of the Whetstone, his wounded leg a dead weight behind him. He felt the bite of the current as it swept him down river. Drawing air into his lungs, he caught a glimpse of Flagg running along the river bank, shooting wildly at his swimming foe, his gait an awkward wobble from his own wounded leg.

Webb submerged, his bullet-torn thigh leaving a trail of crimson through the sluicing water. Coming to the surface fifty yards downstream, he struck with feeble strokes toward the west bank.

A gunshot roared through the night and a bullet plucked the ripples inches beyond him. But he swam on, not daring to dive under the surface again for fear that his wounded leg would rob him of consciousness and he might drown on the river bottom.

Dimly through the star shine, he saw Flagg stop his pursuit to fumble at empty-chambered guns. Then the river had swept him round a curve, and he was masked from the army man's sight by intervening cottonwoods and salt cedars.

Converging currents made a mill race of the Whetstone, and ahead of Webb loomed the foamy trough of a long series of rapids, studded with fanglike rocks which threatened to mangle his body. Then, almost like a voice in delirium he heard his name called, heard the drumming of a horse's hoofs on the rocky bank overlooking the Whetstone's rapids.

Swimming automatically, all feeling gone from his body, the trail scout saw a rider pounding along the trail where only that day he and Flagg had ridden in pursuit of June Castle's supposed abductor.

Webb was certain he was doomed as he saw the rider spur off the bank and into the rushing waters. Flagg, then had not been too drunk to mount his horse and ride in pursuit of his victim. The army man was heading into the channel, bent on riddling his foe with lead before the river could cheat him of vengeance.

And then, as the swimming horse came alongside him, Webb saw something that convinced him he was delirious. He was looking up at the bewhiskered countenance of Jim Howard!

The scout felt his senses blacking out, as Howard thrust out a powerful hand to grasp his wet hair. Then he was dimly aware of being towed along as the frontiersman sent his horse fighting the current, back toward the west bank of the Whetstone.

After an eternity of struggle, Howard's powerful horse gained footing at the mouth of the rapids, and then they were riding up on to the underbrush-dotted trailside.

Stretched out on his back in the grass, Webb could only groan his thanks as Howard leaped from saddle and ran his stubby fingers over the other's lead-torn thigh, his touch gentle as a woman's.

"Ball went clean through, which is good," Howard announced. "She's bled plenty, so I don't reckon it'll pizen. But I got to slap a bandage on her."

The frontiersman made a poultice of fresh-water grass, balled the pad into his bandanna, and then bound it tightly around Webb's wound.

"I was ridin' out to picket my nag in the bottoms when I seen some skunk takin' pot shots at ye, son," Howard explained. "Who in blazes was it? I'm goin' back yonder an' blast him to Kingdom Come, whoever he was—"

Webb sat up groggily, his head spinning.

"It was Ross Flagg," he whispered. "Leave him for me to handle, Jim. My gun is lyin' back there where I left my clothes. I'll square accounts with Flagg if I have to spend the—"

He broke off abruptly and Jim Howard whirled about at the sound of a man breaking through the salt cedars at his very elbow.

The old man's hand shot to his belted six-gun, but he had no opportunity to draw the weapon. An instant later Howard felt the muzzle of a six-gun shoved against his chest, and Ross Flagg glared at him.

"This is just fine," the arvy man cried triumphantly. "This is a real break of luck, you arrivin' to fish my friend Webb out of the river. I'll make you pay for preventing my marriage. Now the two of you can go to hell together!"

CHAPTER 18

Lure of California Gold

Jim Howard had been in tight spots before, and his agile tongue and fertile brain had been the means of saving his life. And now, with a drunken killer's .45 jammed into his chest, the old frontiersman's fluent tongue came to his rescue again.

"Afore you yank that trigger, Flagg, I got a proposition for ye," he said calmly. "How'd a twenty-pound cache of gold dust look to ye? Dust worth nineteen bucks the ounce, an' all yourn for the askin'?"

As if the word "gold" was an iron shackle on his gun hand, Flagg paused, his whisky-inflamed brain picked up Howard's words and pondering them.

"Where'd you get any gold dust, you thievin' old goat?" he demanded scornfully, but he had withdrawn his gun from Howard's chest and his eyes were slit with interest. "And what has gold got to do with me blasting you to bits?"

Webb, propping himself to a sitting position on the grass beside the two men, saw Howard's hairy checks balloon with relief.

"I sold a winter's haul from my trap lines—a young fortune in otter an' beaver skins—to an hombre who was headin' back to Ohio with the gold he'd dug out o' California lodes, Flagg. Twenty pounds of it—an' I'm the only man that knows where that gold is cached. Kill me, an' you cheat yourself out of a fortune."

Ross Flagg drew back a step, his .45s covering the two men. Half drunk, the army man was in a dangerous mood.

"All right—what's your deal?" he snapped.

Howard inhaled deeply, shot a glance down at Webb. Under the menace of Flagg's drop, the old man kept his hands elevated, well away from the butt of his six-gun.

"I'll swap that cache o' gold dust for my life, Flagg.

Plus my word o' honour that I won't report this little deal to the law at any time in the future."

Flagg's brows knotted suspiciously.

"Where is this gold?"

The scout waved vaguely in the general direction of the Utah border.

"Cached a two days' ride from hyar," he said. "Out in the Nez Perce Mountains. I buried the stuff near the spot where I sold them furs to this Californy miner."

Flagg appeared to be considering, his eyes fastened on Webb, his six-gun clutched close to his side.

"All right, it's a bargain," he said finally. "I haven't got any quarrel with you, Howard. When do we start for the cache—tonight? Now?"

Howard nodded.

"All right." Flagg's voice held a note of triumph. "We'll leave—as soon as I've put a bullet through Webb's head."

Jim Howard leaped forward to put his body between the trail scout and Flagg, as the latter swung his six-guns to cover Webb.

"The deal calls for you to spare my pardner's life too, Flagg," Howard said flatly. "You kill him, and you can kill me. I won't lead you to that gold cache unless Webb goes along with us."

Flagg hesitated, hate blazing in his slitted eyes. Then he relaxed, a crafty grin twisting his hard mouth.

"All right," he said. "Turn your back to me, Howard."

Monte Webb climbed unsteadily to his feet, as he saw Flagg holster one gun and then reach out from behind Howard to unbuckle the frontiersman's belt with its bowie knife and pouches six-gun.

Hurling the weapons out into the river, Flagg stepped over to Howard's horse and took down a coil of rope from the saddlehorn.

"Put your hands behind you," he ordered. "I'm takin' no chances of any double cross before we reach that gold."

Working swiftly, Flagg knotted Howard's wrists behind his back. Then, slashing the left-over rope in two against the edge of his cavalry sabre, Flagg turned to Webb. Five minutes later the trail scout was similarly bound.

"We'll go back for Webb's clothes," said Flagg, "and

pick up his horse and mine. Then we're heading for the Nez Perce range. I want plenty of ground between me and the Oregon Trail before daylight comes and Gid Castle begins wondering what became of his scout."

The next few hours were an unreal, fantastic nightmare for Monte Webb, and scarcely less so for Jim Howard.

Returning to the grassy meadow where Webb's horse waited alongside his heap of buckskin clothing, Flagg untied the scout's arms long enough for Webb to dress himself.

Then, helping the scout to mount his sorrel, Flagg knotted his wrists securely to the saddlehorn. That done, the army man led the two horses and his prisoners toward the Oregon Trail wagon camp, and to the spot where his own pony was cropping bluestem in the night.

"How about grub?" demanded Flagg. "I'll have to go back to camp——"

"I got enough pemmican an' dried *penole* meal in my saddlebags to last the three of us to the Nez Perces," Howard told him. "There's plenty o' water an' wild game on the way."

And so, before another hour had elapsed, the strange trio of riders left the Whetstone and set off to the south-west in the direction of the upflung highlands of the Nez Perce range, leaving Gideon Castle's wagon camp unaware of the drama which had transpired out on the river bottom.

Dawn found them twenty miles from the Whetstone camp, deep in the pine-forested wilderness. Flagg, his intoxication now worn off, picked out a secluded ravine and announced that they would make camp until he had had some sleep.

Webb and Howard exchanged exultant glances, but their hope of making a break for freedom was short-lived when Flagg, with Indian-like cunning, took the precaution of roping both of his prisoners to the boles of lodge-pole pine trees, knotting the bonds so securely that escape would have been impossible.

After picketing the three horses, Flagg helped himself to Howard's roll of blankets, spread them out on a carpet of pine needles several yards distant from the trees where he had tied his prisoners, and in a few minutes was snoring lustily.

Staring at each other in the ruddy light of sunrise which

filtered down into the secluded ravine, the two prisoners saw very little in the situation to cheer them.

"Looks like I saved our lives—but not for long," grunted Howard. "Doggone, I wish I had a chaw o' terbacco. How's your laig feel this mornin', son?"

"All right." The harsh lines of fatigue and pain on Webb's face belied his casual dismissal of his throbbing wound. "You didn't swallow Flagg's agreement to spare our lives as soon as he gets his hands on that gold, did you, Jim?"

Howard cast a sharp glance over to Flagg's blanket-shrouded form, to make sure their captor was asleep.

"Shucks, no. A snake o' Flagg's breed would agree to a deal like that in a jiffy. Then, when he got his mitts on that gold cache, he'd laugh in our faces and blow our bellies open with his short guns."

Webb, relaxing as best he could in the many turns of rope which bound him with his back to the pine trunk, nodded bitterly.

"Then we've got to bide our chances to make a break, eh? That won't be so easy, with Flagg ridin' behind us, and his guns out of holster every foot of the way."

The old frontiersman shrugged.

"Dang, I sure wish I had a chaw. Yeah, Monte, we got to try an' make a gitaway some time durin' the next twenty-four hours, because when time comes for a payoff, Ross Flagg is goin' to be madder'n a rattlesnake in dog days. Because, you see, pard, I was lyin' about that gold. I never swapped no pelts for Californy gold dust! I was jest stallin' to give us a chance to figger out some way to out think Flagg!"

Webb felt his heart plummet at his companion's revelation. When they reached the Nez Perce Mountains and Howard began stalling and giving excuses for being unable to find the gold cache, Flagg would know immediately that he had been duped. What he would do then wasn't hard to imagine. Both prisoners slept, drifting off without knowing it. The noon sun roused them, with its clouds of gnats and timber flies crawling over their sweat-sticky faces.

Ross Flagg had already breakfasted on Howard's pemmican and dried *penole* cakes.

"You two don't eat until we reach that gold cache," he

announced. "That'll keep you from stalling about finding that cache, Howard. No gold, no grub. Don't forget that!"

The two captives exchanged helpless glances. Flagg, already wary, had them completely checkmated.

After allowing his prisoners a drink in the mountain stream where he watered their horses, Flagg saddled up and the grim journey was resumed once more.

Again the army man took the precaution of roping his prisoners' wrists to the saddlehorns, thereby making any attempt to spur away from the trail a highly dangerous undertaking. And as during the previous night, Flagg rode with a six-gun in his hand, his horse bringing up the rear of the procession. Sober now, Flagg was proving himself a merciless captor.

They camped at sundown in the foothills of the rugged Nez Perces. Here, alarmed at the haggard faces of his prisoners, Flagg condescended to feed them small rations of pemmican, washed down with ice-cold water from the nearby stream.

Thus refreshed, Webb and Howard were once more forced to back up to convenient trees and be tied in a standing position for the night. This time, Flagg spread his blanket directly between them, so that any attempt to plan a getaway was impossible without rousing him. They were in the saddle again at dawn of the second day, with Jim Howard giving trail directions and leading the cavalcade with a bluff assurance that almost convinced Monte Webb that the old frontiersman was really taking them to a cache of California gold dust.

Around noon, Flagg began showing outward signs of impatience.

"Where is this cache, Howard?" he demanded. "If you're bluffing me, damn you, you'll regret it——"

Howard jerked his head toward the east.

"The cache is just over this ridge," he announced confidently. "We can't take the horses there. We got to go on foot."

Reaching the top of the timbered ridge, Flagg dismounted, tied up his horse to a sapling, and released his prisoners from their saddlehorns. Their wrists, however, remained trussed together.

The situation looked more and more hopeless to Webb. Howard was pulling a bluff; and now a showdown was imminent. If Howard hoped to make a break for it now, Webb knew they were both doomed.

Flagg, alert for treachery, was taking no chances. As the frontiersman led the way into the aspen thickets, bound for the mythical cache of California gold, Flagg forced Monte Webb to hobble along at his fellow-prisoner's side.

Walking immediately behind them, Flagg kept a six-gun muzzle pressed against their backs. Any attempt to bolt would mean certain death.

Sweat beaded Webb's forehead as Howard led the way up the steep ridgeside until they reached a level bench. There Howard halted, his lungs heaving with exertion. His eyes, meeting Webb's, seemed to flash a message, the significance of which was unintelligible to the scout.

Did that glance mean for him to make a break for it, risking a bullet from Flagg's ever-ready .45? Or did it mean that Howard intended to charge Flagg, thereby giving Webb some faint chance at a getaway during the confusion?

Instead, the frontiersman walked up to a low granite outcrop and pointed his trussed arms at a tiny pile of grey ashes and charred bits of wood.

"This is whar me an' the California miner camped the day we dickered for them otter an' beaver skins," Howard said, his eyes fixed on Flagg's face. "An' now, Flagg, afore I tell you where I cached that gold—how about you untyin' us?"

Flagg, circling warily about them, stared down at the remains of the old camp fire. An exultant light blazed in the army man's eyes, as he saw tangible evidence of the fact that Howard had once camped on this remote spot.

"Nothin' doin', Howard!" he snapped in answer to the other's question. "I got to have that gold in my hands before I give you and Webb your freedom."

Howard snorted with derision.

"Yeah? How do we know you won't shoot us like dogs, soon as you got that gold?"

Flagg squatted down, hefting his Colt .45s menacingly.

"This is no time to deadlock ourselves arguing, Howard," he said curtly. "I'll live up to my side of the bargain as

soon as you live up to yours. Where is that gold cached?" Howard shrugged, turning to Webb.

" Flagg holds the cards in this deal, pardner," the old man said resignedly. " Nothin' to do but put ourselves at his mercy, I guess——"

Monte Webb felt his heart racing. The air was electric with a nerve-sapping tension. Showdown was imminent. Howard, lying about a gold cache, had some counter scheme in mind. If not, then he was bringing the impossible hoax to a head.

" You're practically settin' on that gold cache now, Flagg," said Howard, pointing to the ash heap. " I buried that gold yonder, an' built a fire on top of it, so nobody'd see where the turf had been dug into. Six inches under them ashes you'll find the price of our lives."

Eyeing his two prisoners triumphantly, Flagg ordered them to step back a good dozen yards from the camp fire site. Then, placing his six-guns down within quick reach in case either of the prisoners sought to make a break, Flagg brushed the layer of ashes aside.

Keeping his eyes on Webb and Howard, alert for the slightest sign of a getaway attempt on their part, the ex-army captain thrust both hands wrist deep into the soft earth below the camp fire remains.

Then, as Monte Webb waited in breathless suspense, he saw a miracle occur. There seemed to be an explosion of sand and ashes under Ross Flagg's very face, and the cavalryman leaped to his feet and lurched backward, a scream of agony bursting from his lips.

Clamped about the man's wrists was a steel-jawed wolf-trap, dangling from which was a short steel chain connected with a peg buried under the ashes!

CHAPTER 19

Nez Perce Strategy

The wolf trap's snapping jaws about Flagg's wrists was Jim Howard's signal to get into action.

Racing across the short floor of the benchland, the frontiersman pounced upon the screaming killer even as Flagg's backward lunge pulled the trap chain taut. Hurling his scrawny bulk against the other, Howard knocked him off his feet.

Then, before Flagg could regain his balance, Howard drew back a booted foot and drove a kick on to Flagg's temple. Knocked cold, the killer flopped on his side, limp as a dead man. Quickly Howard reached down with his trussed hands and drew Flagg's long, curved-bladed cavalry sabre from its scabbard.

"Never kicked a man before," he grunted, as Monte Webb hurried over, his face aglow with excitement. "But in this case I wouldn't 've keered ifn I'd kicked his brains out."

Gripping the sabre clumsily, Howard drove the sword deep into the soft earth. Then it was a simple matter for both men to saw their bonds against the razor-whetted blade of the sabre, until their hands were free.

Of one accord, Jim Howard and Monte Webb jumped to snatch up a six-gun apiece, from the spot where Ross Flagg had so carefully laid his weapons.

"Howard, this is one tall tale you can tell that'll be true!" declared Webb, reaching out to pump his friend's hands. "How'd you know that trap was buried under the ashes?"

Howard did not reply until he had fished out a plug of tobacco and stuffed his cheek to capacity.

"Shucks, it's one o' my own string o' traps!" he said casually. "I got 'em all along the Nez Perces. Most of 'em are water traps fer otter an' beaver, though, an' they wouldn't work. This one was for wolf. Them varmints like to dig around a camp ground huntin' garbage an' sech, so it's an old trick to hide a trap under ashes thataway."

Webb's eyes glowed with admiration for the cagy old woodsman.

"Then you knew, all along, that you were leading Flagg to a trap instead of a gold cache?"

Howard shook his head. "Naw—I disremember jest when I did think up this trap idee," he confessed modestly. "Some time yestiddy, I reckon—leastwise, I never had a chance to tell you what I had in mind. But I was gamblin' everything on not reachin' this trap an' findin' a wolf had already tripped it."

The two erstwhile prisoners circled around the inert form of the man who would have shot them in cold blood had Howard's promise of a gold cache come true.

"He's knocked colder'n a fish," chuckled Howard. "Let's moscy down to the horses an' get some grub in our bellies, son. Then we can make up our minds whether to string Flagg to a tree, or take him back to Fort Hall to die legal before a firin' squad."

With a final backward glance at the motionless form on the ground, the two scouts started back down the hillside, following a dim game trail which would do away with the necessity of fighting their way through the bushy short cut which Howard had employed in reaching the bench.

Not until now did the two men realize how gruelling the trek had been, how famished their stomachs were for nourishment. Webb's wounded leg was healing, but every step he took was painful.

The game trail brought them to the level of the ravine, a quarter of a mile or more from the spot where they had left their horses.

With dragging steps, the two scouts toiled their way up the slope, too fatigued to talk. They were bent on one thing—to get at Howard's saddlebags and the food they contained.

And then, as they slogged their way through the thick underbrush, there came to their ears the sound of pounding hoofs, the noise of horses breaking through brush.

Halting stockstill, the two men stared at each other as the hoofbeats died away through the timber.

"Our hosses pulled loose!" cried Howard. "But they'll quit runnin' when they get to water. Come on!"

Breaking into a run, the two scouts fought their way

through the snarled jungle of aspen and fernbrake, until they reached the spot where Flagg had tied their ponies. It was Monte Webb who spotted the trail of crimson splashes which led down the hillside to end at the place where the horses had been tied.

"Blood!" he cried. "Do you suppose——"

Faces grey with dread, the scouts slammed their way up the rocky incline, pawing through whippy foliage, scrambling on hands and knees to retrace the path they had taken to reach Howard's old camp ground. And ahead of them was traced a blood-smeared trail, that could mean only one thing.

"Flagg wasn't knocked out!" groaned Howard, as they pushed out on to the open bench. "We're two almighty chumps, Webb. He outsmarted us!"

It was true. Before their eyes was a gore-stained wolf trap, lying empty beside the tiny crater in the ashes. Ross Flagg had been able to spring the trap apart with his foot, and release his bleeding hands from their grip.

"We got his guns—but he's got our horses, Webb!" said Howard in a voice bleak with chagrin. "That means Flagg's left us afoot an' without grub, miles from nowhere. The best we kin do is shoot wild game to live on—an' hoof it like Injuns all the way to Fort Hall!"

Ross Flagg was a bedraggled, long-haired ghost of his former sleek and immaculately groomed self when he rode into the stockade of Fort Hall two weeks later. His uniform, with its medals and gold braid that had gleamed so proudly in the Idaho sunlight as he waited for his ill-fated wedding ceremony to commence, was now tattered to ribbons, caked with mud and impregnated with trail dust.

No frontiersman was Ross Flagg. His outdoor life had been confined to possum hunting in Kentucky, and reconnoitering battlefields with fellow soldiers. Thus the army man's trek out of the Nez Perce Mountains had been a zig-zagging and circuitous one. Without compass to guide him, and only a rudimentary knowledge of wagon craft, he had lost his way dozens of times as he followed Indian and game trails. Only when he had reached the deep ruts of the Oregon Trail did Flagg know that he was on the right track of Gideon Castle's wagon train.

The trail to Fort Hall was littered with the rotting and rusting possessions of countless emigrants who had preceded Castle's plodding caravan into the north-west country. Anvils, discarded wagon wheels, and the skeletons of oxen and mules; rude wooden crosses marking graves, and every twenty miles or so the trampled grass and long-dead ashes of camp fires, showed where Castle's train had camped on its onward march from the Whetstone River camp.

The fortnight had been a gruelling period of torture for Ross Flagg. His hands still bore the puckered, festering scars of the wolf trap which had crushed flesh and dented bone. But the ex-army man knew he owed his freedom to the fact that he had regained consciousness in time to extricate himself from the grip of Jim Howard's trap.

Because Howard had chosen to follow the game trail back to the horses, Flagg had been able, by taking the short cut, to get to the spot first. Near exhaustion when he found the picketed horses, he had managed to salvage strength enough to press his advantage. Mounting his own saddler, he had taken the precaution of bringing the horses of his erstwhile prisoners along with him.

By thus setting Webb and Howard afoot in the wild Nez Perce highlands, Flagg had no wishful hope that he had thus sealed the doom of the two men. He knew that the scouts were both fully capable of providing for themselves in the wilderness, especially as they had a pair of Colt .45s in their possession with which to kill wild game.

Reaching Fort Hall, Flagg first made sure that Gideon Castle's wagon train was not there; he could not risk answering Castle's flood of questions regarding the mystery of the disappearance of the three men from the Whetstone camp a fortnight before.

In spite of his bedraggled condition, Flagg was recognized by the captain of U.S. cavalry who had routed the band of renegades in Shoshone Basin, and returned the herd of stolen cattle to the Missourians. But the ex-cavalryman had already outlined a story which he knew would pass muster with the Fort Hall soldiers.

"Monte Webb was swimming in the Whetstone, and he must have been seized with a cramp," Flagg told his interested audience, a few minutes after his arrival at Fort Hall. "At

any rate, Jim Howard and myself were sitting on the bank, when we heard Webb scream for help——”

“What became of old Howard, then?” asked the commandant of the fort, his anxious voice revealing his concern over the veteran frontiersman.

“Howard peeled off his buckskins and swam out to rescue Webb,” answered Flagg, without batting an eyelash. “It was dark, but I saw Howard go down when Webb grabbed him by the neck.”

“And what were you doing all that time, Captain Flagg?” Flagg shrugged regretfully.

“I was unable to swim because of my wounded leg,” he replied. “I did get on my horse and rode along the Whetstone. Finally I found their bodies—drowned—on a sandbar a mile or two away from the camp.”

The Fort Hall soldiers exchanged sorrowful glances. Jim Howard had been a beloved and respected character around the frontier fort, and news of his death came as a real blow to his many friends there.

“How come you didn’t report their deaths to Gideon Castle?” demanded the captain, who had camped with the Missourians on the night of the scouts’ disappearance.

Flagg grinned sheepishly.

“I got lost,” he said. “I buried Webb and Howard, and by that time it was well after midnight. I . . . I tried to ride back to the wagons, but all the next day I found myself riding through strange country. It was over a week before I got back to the Whetstone camp, but all I found was two grazing horses—these horses I brought along. They belong to Webb and Howard, I guess. Anyway, Castle’s wagon train had left.”

The cavalry captain rubbed his jaw dubiously.

“Castle told us you got drunk and went gunning for Monte Webb,” he said gravely. “We also heard that Jim Howard run off with the girl you were going to marry. Are you sure those two scouts were drowned, Flagg?”

But Flagg’s story was unshakable, and whatever the suspicions of the Fort Hall garrison might have been, they had nothing tangible to pin on the Union soldier.

“Castle’s wagons have gone on to Fort Boise, with one of our army scouts guiding them,” Flagg was finally informed.

"If you ride hard enough, you'll overtake them. All you have to do is follow the Snake River until you reach Boise. That's where the wagons cross over into Oregon."

Flagg spent the following day resting at Fort Hall, enjoying his first real food in weeks. He had had to ration Howard's scanty food supply in order to keep from starving.

The next morning, Flagg headed out on the Oregon Trail alone, having left the horses of the two scouts behind at the insistence of the Fort Hall commander.

No longer in need of worrying about his own safety—and with a generous supply of food and ammunition, and an army six-gun for his own protection—Ross Flagg began to turn his thoughts to his personal grievances.

Whether he ran into Jim Howard or Monte Webb again in the future, Flagg did not care. Now his rage and thirst for vengeance was turned upon June Castle, who had publicly humiliated him, broken his pride, scorned his offer of marriage. And to a man of Ross Flagg's arrogant self-esteem, to be jilted by a girl was far worse than to have been outwitted by Jim Howard.

"She won't get away with it," burned the thought through Ross Flagg's brain, as he pushed doggedly on toward Fort Boise. "She'll live to regret the day she turned me down!"

The thought grew in intensity until it became an obsession in Flagg's warped brain. June Castle's face floated before his eyes as he followed the Oregon Trail up the Snake, and memories of her haunted his dreams at night.

A week following his departure from Fort Hall, Flagg topped a timbered ridge overlooking the canyon of the Snake River, to see the log bastions and pole stockade of Fort Boise below him. Then the army man's eyes flitted from the American flag which floated over the old Hudson's Bay Co. fur-trading post, and followed the bank of the Snake until he saw the massed wagons of Gideon Castle's caravan grouped on the bottomland before the river ford.

Across the Snake lay the green, rolling hills and forests of Oregon. The Missourians, after fifteen hundred miles of travel through Indian-infested country, had at last reached the threshold of their land of promise. One more river to cross, and they would be treading Oregon soil. Two more weeks of travel, and they would have reached trail's end.

Ross Flagg's taut mouth relaxed in a grin, as he dismounted among the pines, to wait out the rest of the afternoon. With the coming of dusk, he would make his way down to the wagon camp and seek out June Castle's tent.

"She's had time to change her mind," the ex-army captain told himself. "Maybe, if she thinks Webb is dead, she'll be glad to take me back. If not—" He rubbed the hilt of his cavalry sabre, and hot anger shot through his veins. And at precisely that same moment, two horsemen were moving along the Oregon Trail twenty miles in the rear of Ross Flagg.

Monte Webb and Jim Howard, once more riding the horses they had found waiting for them at Fort Hall, were sparing neither their mounts nor themselves in an effort to overtake Gideon Castle's Oregon-bound wagon train.

It had taken them only two days longer to reach Fort Hall, tramping endlessly on bloodstained feet, than it had taken Ross Flagg to reach the Idaho outpost on horseback.

Like men returned from the dead, the two trail scouts had been welcomed by the garrison at Fort Hall. But what they had learned there regarding the arrival and departure of Ross Flagg had made them refuse to spend any time resting at the outpost.

For them there could be no rest—until they had overtaken the merciless killer who had left them afoot and without food out in the Nez Perce mountain country. And, unless they mistook Ross Flagg's motives entirely, they would stage their showdown with the army man at Fort Boise—amid the very wagons that Flagg had travelled with from Missouri.

CHAPTER 20

Trail's End

It was a gala night for the members of Gideon Castle's wagon train, as they finished their supper alongside the waters of the Snake River.

Only about a hundred yards of rushing water separated them from the paradise of virgin country that was their goal. Behind them, now, was the threat of Indian massacre and the rigours of the Continental Divide; behind them the deserts and bandit-infested badlands.

But not all of the four-score families remaining out of the ninety-two that had left Missouri six months previously were celebrating their arrival at the threshold of Oregon with unmixed joy. Many a family had left a father or a mother or a son in an unmarked grave back along the Trail. Many a mother busied herself with routine camp duties, fighting to keep back tears as her mind reviewed the hardships and bereavements of the overland trail, postponing to the last the disposal of clothing and toys which had belonged to little ones who had not lived to see the panorama of mountains and forests now looming in the dusk across the Snake.

Among the latter category, June Castle was a conspicuous example. True, fate had spared her father and mother for the tasks awaiting their founding of a new home in the Willamette Valley. But for June there loomed a future that was empty and purposeless, a destiny that for her was without meaning, without hope.

"Monte's vanishing that night at the Whetstone had something to do with Ross—I know it, mother," the girl was saying, as she and Mrs. Castle busied themselves setting up the army cots in their tent, and unrolling bedding from their nearby wagon. "Ross was drunk, and he was swearing to get even with Monte for——"

Virginia Castle paused in her work to put a comforting arm around the buckskin-jacketed girl who had played a

man's rôle throughout the long trek from Missouri, driving an ox team and sharing the rigorous duties of the overland trail with a fortitude and a zest that had been equalled by but few of the other women in the caravan.

"Now, now, June," Mrs. Castle consoled her daughter. "I'm sure that Monte must have gone on some important trip with Mr. Howard. Whatever happened to Ross Flagg is of no concern to you now. I'm sure some day we'll get word from Monte. After all—"

A sound of running steps outside the tent made both women look up. An instant later the canvas flies shot open to reveal Gideon Castle, his face alight with excitement.

In the old wagoner's arms was a small, brass-bound oaken chest, of a type in which the emigrants carried reserve gunpowder or coal oil.

"Folks, I've made a discovery that's like a blessin' right from God," panted the devout old wagon captain, thumping the small keg down on the grassy floor of the tent. "I ain't dead certain yet, but I think—" He broke off, completely out of breath.

The two women stared down at the keg, as they saw Castle drop on his knees beside it and start gouging at the wooden bung with his bowie knife.

"Dad, what on earth's come over you?" cried June. "What aren't you certain of?"

Castle looked up, his eyes flashing with excitement.

"I was ferretin' through Zeke Prichett's wagon load o' barrels, hunting a small keg o' axle grease for some o' the wagons," he exclaimed. "I run across this here keg—and unless I'm mistaken, it's *the keg of gold dust and money* we hid on Prichett's wagon for safe keepin'!"

Mrs. Castle and her daughter exchanged startled glances.

"Dad, are you feelin' all right?" cried the elderly woman. "You know as well as I do that Grote Kettleman stole that keg of gold and lost it in that quicksand—"

Castle jerked the wooden stopper from the keg's bung hole and then jumped up to seize the lantern which hung from the tent's ridge pole.

Holding it down to the two-inch hole in the side of the cask, Castle let the yellow beams of light fall into the opening. Exposed inside the keg was a piece of buckskin pouch!

With a choked gasp the Missourian thrust his bowie knife through the opening to slit open the leather poke.

Then, rolling the keg sidewise, he poured out into the leathery cup of his palm a little cascade of glittering yellow dust.

"The good Lord be praised!" he whispered as fervently as a preacher intoning a prayer. "It's true! Prichett didn't take the keg o' gold out of his wagon, that night that Grote Kettleman wanted to add his money to the bank! Zeke Prichett made a mistake—"

June and her mother dropped on their knees beside the old man, staring aghast at the little heap of gold dust in his trembling palm.

"It . . . it doesn't seem possible!" breathed Mrs. Castle.

Tears trickled down the old man's leathery checks. His voice was choked with emotion as he whispered out his explanation for the seeming miracle:

"It's true, ma. The reason we hid that gold in Prichett's wagon was because we knew this keg would be hard to locate if those plotters tried to rob the wagon. This keg is just like several others in Prichett's wagon. Old Zeke never realized that Kettleman got hold of the wrong one."

"But Kettleman—"

"Kettleman most likely carried off a cask o' horseshoe nails," explained Castle. "If he hadn't been in such a hurry he'd have realized it wasn't heavy enough to contain gold."

Mrs. Castle clasped her hands in an attitude of prayer.

"What glorious news to give our neighbours tonight!" cried June, her voice vibrant with happiness for the first time in weeks. "This will mean everything to our people—getting their life's savings restored to them, here at the very end of our journey."

Gideon Castle got to his feet, letting the lantern's rays flash on the little heap of gold dust as he put the lantern back on its roof-pole hook.

"What are we waitin' fer?" he cried. "I'm goin' to blow the assembly call on the bugle, an' when everybody's listenin', I'm goin' to bust the news!"

Of one accord, the three Castles turned toward the door of the tent. And then their smiles were wiped out, as the

canvas flies parted to reveal the towering figure of Ross Flagg.

Like some spectre from the grave, the ragged army man stepped inside the tent, a cocked six-gun in his hand. Behind a mat of a week-old beard, Flagg's mouth wore a diabolical grin as he saw Gideon Castle's hand drop, to let a little shower of gold dust trickle down on to the grass at his feet.

"*Flagg!*" Castle's voice was like escaping steam in the silence of the tent. "You're back!"

Flagg nodded, his eyes glittering.

"Yeah. I'm back. And it seems I'm in time to be the first to learn your interesting news about the caravan's gold cache, eh, Gideon?"

With a berserk roar, Castle's knotty fist shot down to the butt of the Paterson model six-gun at his thigh. But before he could whip the gun out of holster, Ross Flagg's gun barrel swatted hard across his skull and the wagon captain dropped on his face, knocked cold by the vicious blow.

"Don't scream, Mrs. Castle!" Flagg warned. "I'll shoot June through the heart if you make an outcry!"

With a supreme effort at self-control, the white-haired woman suppressed a cry of horror. Then she dropped to her knees, to take her husband's bleeding head in her hands.

"I'm taking this gold with me," Flagg addressed himself to June. "The devil knows I tried hard enough to get it before—all along the Trail——"

He laughed insanely, as he saw the horror dawn in the girl's eyes.

"Yes," Flagg boasted. "It was me who plotted that night with Alabama Jones and Jute Flathers, to get that gold! It was me who found out from your own lips, June, that the gold had been hidden in Zeke Prichett's wagon—it was me who got Grote Kettleman to murder the old cooper. But I thought Kettleman lost that gold in the quicksand, just like everyone did——"

June recoiled from Flagg's hate-contorted face, as he approached her, his six-gun aimed at her heart.

"I'm taking you, too, June!" he whispered. "You're going to be my wife. I'll kill you before I——"

Flagg started violently, as he saw Mrs. Castle leap toward him with outstretched hands, in a beserk attempt at seizing his gun.

With a curse, the killer brought the gun barrel down in a short, clubbing arc that dropped the woman over her husband's body, dazed by the blow to her skull.

Even as Flagg leaped to encircle June's head in the crook of his left elbow and clamp a hand about her mouth, he saw that the precaution was unnecessary. The girl had wilted in a dead faint.

Outside the tent, Flagg could hear the voices of the Missouri emigrants, lifted in hymn singing to the accompaniment of scraping fiddles and strumming banjos. The camp was oblivious of the tragedy that had struck their leader's family, inside the lamp-lighted tent.

And Ross Flagg had taken the precaution to approach the wagon camp from an angle that would not be seen by the congregated emigrants around the bonfire, so he knew his own arrival had not been witnessed. Being so close to Fort Boise, Castle had dispensed with the usual night guard.

A heady sense of triumph welled in Flagg's heart, as he stared down at the criss-crossed bodies of the old couple he had clubbed into insensibility.

Triumph had come at last; triumph over June Castle, and the added victory of finding the gold keg which he had struggled to obtain back in Wyoming, and which fate had now thrust upon him for the taking.

Ripping a piece of blanket from Mrs. Castle's bedroll, Flagg fashioned a crude gag about June's slack lips. Then, lifting her inert figure in his arms, he carried the unconscious girl out into the moonlit night. He had left his horse behind the tent, its reins tied to a hind wheel of a prairie schooner.

Moving without haste in the shadow of the covered wagon, Flagg stretched June out on the grass. Then he ducked back inside the tent.

It was but the work of a moment to wedge the wooden stopper back into the bung hole of the treasure cask. Kicking it more securely into the aperture, Flagg lifted the keg with a grunt of exertion, and carried it outside.

He cut a pair of tent ropes and tied the small cask in position behind his saddle cantle. Then he boosted June aboard, and swung into saddle himself.

A few minutes later, Gideon Castle dragged his pain-shot body out of the tent, shaking his head dizzily as the cool

night breeze helped to clear his senses. He was in time to see Ross Flagg riding away through the moonlight, headed for the nearby ford of the Snake River.

Even with fireworks dazzling his vision, his whole body numb from shock, Castle knew that the huddled figure in Flagg's arms was his daughter. Clinging to the tent pole, the Missourian stared back inside the tent, where his wife was beginning to stir back to her senses.

Castle's throat worked, but he could not summon a yell to his lips. Even could he have screamed a warning, he knew it would have gone unheard among the celebrating emigrants, who were dancing and singing over by a big bonfire a hundred yards from the wagons, in the direction of Fort Boise.

Then, as he lurched away from the tent and headed toward the singers, Castle saw two horsemen ride up through the gloom and leap from saddle, a few yards from his tent.

"Howdy, Gid!" came the familiar voice of Monte Webb, as the tall figure of the buckskin-clad scout strode up into the bar of lantern light cast through the open fly of the tent. "I'll bet you weren't expectin' me an' Jim Howard to drop in on you tonight, eh?"

Castle squeezed his eyes shut. He had already experienced one miracle tonight; it was impossible that another could occur. But when he opened his eyes, it was to see Monte Webb's grinning face before him, to feel the scout's bronzed hands clasping his own.

Behind Webb, the scrawny figure of old Jim Howard was approaching, leading their lather-flecked horses.

"June—she was jest carried off by that skunk of a Ross Flagg," blurted out the old Missourian, pointing frantically toward the Snake River ford.

Webb's jaw sagged open in astonishment and alarm, as he saw a thread of blood zigzag down out of Castle's snowy hair and across the old man's face.

At the same moment, a groan from inside the tent directed the eyes of the two scouts to the woman, who was propping herself off the ground with her elbows, under the beams of the swaying lantern.

"He's crossin' the Snake now," moaned Castle. "Ride after 'em, Monte. June's life is dependin' on you—"

With a low oath, Monte Webb whirled and jerked his bridle reins from Jim Howard's hand. Then he was in saddle, wheeling his sorrel about and digging in his spur rowels.

Shoulder to shoulder, Howard and Castle stood staring off through the phantom moonlight, as they saw Webb's horse hit the shallow waters of the Snake River at a gallop.

Through withers-deep water, Monte Webb sent his star-faced sorrel plunging across the swift current of the Snake. Even as the horse gained the west bank and splashed out on to Oregon soil, the trail scout caught a glimpse of Ross Flagg's double-laden horse topping the star-powdered skyline to the west and vanishing into the night beyond the ridge.

Thrusting his six-gun back into the wet holster, Webb leaned across his saddlhorn and rowelled the sorrel for its utmost burst of speed. Rocketing up the tree-dotted slope, he again caught sight of Ross Flagg moving like a black ghost across a stretch of moonlit open country to the northwest.

Within a mile he had cut Flagg's lead by half, for the ex-army man's horse was no fresher than Webb's sorrel, and was handicapped by its double burden and the added weight of the gold keg lashed behind the cantle.

With wind whipping through his hair, Webb drove relentless spurs into Starface's protesting flanks, but the speedy horse rewarded him with a renewed burst of speed.

And then, up ahead, Ross Flagg glanced back over his shoulder as the drumming of hoofbeats reached his ears.

Grimly, Ross Flagg drew rein, pulling June's body against him as a living shield. Flight would be useless, and to hole up and shoot it out with the pursuing rider would be impossible in the fetlock-deep prairie grass.

Unholstering his six-gun, Flagg drew careful aim at the oncoming rider. Then, even as he pulled trigger, June Castle broke her arms free of her kidnapper's grasp and knocked Flagg's gun upward.

Writhing violently inside the crushing embrace of Flagg's left arm, June flung herself outward, and as the horse bucked violently following the gunshot, the girl plunged free of Flagg's grip and struck the ground.

With a hoarse yell of desperation, Flagg leaped out of

saddle, intending to race to the girl's side and use her as a guarantee against any bullets from the oncoming rider.

But June had divined Flagg's intention. Dazed by her fall, still limp from the ordeal of her fainting spell, the Missouri girl staggered to her feet and started running, pulling the gag from her mouth.

"Damn you—I'll—" Flagg jerked up his six-gun and notched its sights on June's back as the girl ran desperately out on to the plain.

Then the oncoming horseman triggered a six-gun, and Flagg felt the Colt .45 drop from his fingers as a leaden slug smashed through the bones of his forearm.

"Monte!" screamed June, as she recognized the buck-skin-clad scout who was drawing rein a few yards away. "Monte—it's you—"

With gunsmoke spewing from his six-gun bore, Webb swung out of saddle and raced forward, putting himself between the girl and Flagg.

Groaning with pain, the killer staggered to his horse and pulled a Spencer rifle from its saddle boot.

"Get your hands up, Flagg!" came Webb's warning shout, as he faced the bayed killer across a moonlit gap of a dozen feet. "I've got you covered!"

But even as Webb stalked forward, Ross Flagg whipped the walnut stock of the rifle to his cheek, thrust a blood-dripping finger through the trigger guard.

Spang! The Colt in Monte Webb's hand bucked and thundered in the night, and through spouting gun-smoke the scout saw Flagg lurch under the impact of a bullet through his chest. Flagg's knees buckled, but once more he raised the Spencer. His trigger finger flexed convulsively, and the rifle crashed like bursting thunder.

Webb ducked instinctively as the bullet screamed past his ear. Then he braced himself, and flame shot again and again from his recoiling six-gun as he emptied the Colt.

Riddled by unerring slugs, the corpse of Ross Flagg dropped twitching in the blood-spattered prairie grass, his sightless eyes reflecting the sickle-shaped Oregon moon.

"Monte— Oh, my dear!"

June's soft cry snapped Webb back to earth, and he thrust his hot-barrelled six-gun back into its holster.

When he turned it was to sweep June into his arms. For a long minute they stood there, the girl's hair fluttering softly against his throat. Then Webb's fingers tilted her chin upward, and there was only the moon and the two horses there on the Oregon prairie to witness their first kiss.

"We've found each other, Monte. We had to come all the way to Oregon to find each other," June whispered tenderly.

"Yes, June," Monte said, holding her closer. "And we've got a whole life to live out here at trail's end. We'll be together, always."

Up in the black vault of the Oregon heavens, a discreet moon buried its face behind a cottony bank of cloud.